

## THE PARTISAN HEURISTIC IN LOW-INFORMATION ELECTIONS

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**Abstract** Much literature has focused on the influence of partisan information on voter decision making. In this article, we attempt to gain a better understanding of this effect by comparing the survey responses of vote-choice questions that provide party labels and those that do not. We show that less educated survey respondents are substantially less likely to express a vote preference when party labels are not available to them. In addition, we also find evidence that those who can state a vote intention in nonpartisan races are less able to link their candidate choice to their party identification. We conclude by demonstrating that, when surveys do not provide partisan cues, the small number of respondents who are willing to state their vote intentions and the large number of those who appear to be guessing create great difficulties for pollsters trying to predict election results.

### Introduction

Political scientists often question the electorate's cognitive capacity for thinking about politics. Indeed, two of the classic schools of voting do not find the American people to be avid consumers of politics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Citizens have an especially hard time when dealing with down-ballot contests (elections for offices that are listed at the bottom of the ballot) for which information may be more difficult to come by. However, research also shows that citizens can still make reasonable voting decisions by using party identification as a cue. In fact, nearly every theory of voting in the American politics literature includes party identification as a critical—if not the only—factor explaining vote choice. Even when information about candidates is in short supply, voters can rely on partisan information.

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In this article, we attempt to gauge the influence of partisan information in aiding voter decision making in low-information contests. We use survey data that provide a quasi-experiment to measure the effect of partisan information because we are able to compare responses for several statewide partisan contests in California with the statewide nonpartisan election for superintendent of public instruction. First, we develop our theoretical expectations and state our hypotheses. Second, we explain the data and analytical techniques that we use in testing the hypotheses. Next, we present our findings. Finally, we conclude by drawing out the implications of our findings with regard to the importance of partisan information in guiding vote choices and the problems that pollsters face when trying to assess nonpartisan races.

### Partisanship and Political Decision Making

The American voting literature has often been critical of citizens and their ability to make well-informed voting decisions (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). However, as Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) note, many political scientists have revolted against the minimalist arguments made by the Michigan school. Many scholars argue that, while members of the public may have little information about a given electoral issue, they are capable of picking up cheap cues, or heuristics, to make a reliable vote choice (Downs 1957; Mondak 1993b; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most reliable and “cheapest cue” available to voters is a candidate’s party affiliation (Downs 1957).<sup>2</sup> In fact, Rahn (1993, p. 473) writes: “In partisan elections, the most powerful cue provided by the political environment is the candidate’s membership in a particular political party. Even if voters know nothing else about a candidate, the ballot provides them with one important piece of information. The cue provided by the party label is simple, direct, and . . . consequential in shaping individuals’ perceptions and evaluations of political candidates.”

Even the authors of *The American Voter*, who indicted citizens for a lack of knowledge about issues, demonstrated that many were able to make reasonable choices by using partisanship as a cue. And certainly party identification has an enormous impact on vote choice. Indeed, virtually every voting model proposed by political scientists since Campbell et al. has included party

1. See Kuklinski and Hurley (1994), however, for an interesting examination of the reliability of heuristics.

2. We certainly are not arguing that all party candidates are alike or that party identification is a perfect cue. In fact, the issue of abortion shows that this is not the case. Many Republicans are prochoice, as some Democrats are prolife. Nevertheless, in the absence of other information, party identification is normally quite reliable. And, as Rahn notes, even when candidates’ positions are inconsistent with that of the party (e.g., the position of a prolife Democrat), citizens ignore the conflicting information and still rely on party as a cue.

identification as a—if not the—central influence on candidate preferences (Brody and Page 1972; Jackson 1975; Markus and Converse 1979).

The reason for the importance of party in voting models is simple: parties lower the costs of voting by providing citizens with fairly reliable cues. Few voters are aware of many of the positions that candidates hold on various issues. However, if the voter is in favor of school vouchers and she knows that Republicans are more likely to support that position than Democrats, then, without being aware of the candidate's stance on the issue, she can assume that the Republican candidate is more likely to represent her views. In his influential book on political parties, Paul Allen Beck wrote: "For millions of Americans, the party label is the chief cue for their decisions about candidates or issues. It is the point of reference that allows them to organize and simplify the buzzing confusion and strident rhetoric of American politics. It shapes their perceptions and structures their choices; it relates their political values and goals to the real options of American politics" (Beck 1997, p. 8). Thus, in a two-party system, partisanship condenses politics into a simple dichotomy that voters can comprehend and upon which they can base their political decisions.

The party label is especially helpful for respondents when surveys ask them to express candidate preferences for low-information offices weeks before the election. As Mondak (1993a, 1993b) argues, people are more likely to rely on heuristics when there is a high need for cognitive efficiency. In down-ballot contests, the need for cognitive efficiency is greatest because of the sheer number of elections and the difficulty in obtaining information about them. Many citizens do not acquire information about down-ballot contests until days or hours before they go to the polls. Other voters never obtain such information. Thus, we argue that respondents in a preelection survey will rely heavily on the partisan heuristic when asked to express a preference in a low-information contest. Similarly, when interviewers do not provide respondents with partisan information about the candidates in these contests, we believe that some survey participants will draw on other information when reporting their likely vote choice, but that most respondents will simply guess or express no preference at all. If this is the case, pollsters face a challenge in trying to estimate candidate support in low-information elections without party cues.

Some respondents will be able to give an informed response because they have information in addition to party identification available to help them make their vote choice. We expect to find that highly educated respondents will be more likely to express a preference when no partisan information is provided. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) show that Americans with more formal education have significantly greater knowledge about politics than less educated citizens.

There is also evidence that more educated citizens may lie on surveys in order to seem more engaged than they actually are. For example, Neuman (1986) analyzed voter-turnout records, compared them with responses to the

1980 National Election Studies, and found that more educated respondents were more likely to say they had voted when they had not done so. Silver, Anderson, and Abramson (1986) used vote validation studies conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center to come to the same conclusion. More educated citizens are those who are most likely to support the norm of voting, so when they do not vote, they feel more pressure to say that they did. Likewise, we expect that highly educated respondents who may not have enough knowledge to give a candidate preference on a preelection survey may do so anyway rather than admit that they do not know.

### Data and Methodology

When attempting to understand the effect of partisan information on decision making, the challenge for scholars has often been the lack of a baseline comparison where party cues are unavailable. The main difficulty is that almost all nonpartisan elections are at the county or municipal level and few organizations invest time or money in administering surveys for those elections. This lack of survey data has most often led political scientists to either ignore nonpartisan elections altogether or to use precinct-level voting returns to aid their investigations (Lee 1960; Salisbury and Black 1963; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Unfortunately, the problem with using precinct-level data is that it is more difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of partisan information on various segments of the population.

Squire and Smith (1988) produced one notable use of survey data to study nonpartisan elections. Their analysis utilized a California survey to examine how voters reacted to the introduction of additional information in a nonpartisan judicial merit retention election. In one sense, we try to expand on the work of Squire and Smith. The information introduced in their study was not the party affiliation of the judges but the name of the governor who appointed them. Also, because the study focused on retention elections, the choices given were not between two candidates but whether to retain a particular person. Their findings indicate that respondents who were aware of the appointing governor used their feelings toward that governor to make decisions about whether to retain the justices he appointed. Thus, Squire and Smith's analysis demonstrates that voters use additional information when such information is provided in a nonpartisan contest. Our analysis builds on this work not only by directly testing the effects of party labels on citizens' propensity and ability to make vote decisions but also by examining how the lack of partisan information affects survey accuracy. Because many people decline to choose a candidate before the election and others simply seem to be choosing blindly, we believe that the estimates produced by preelection surveys will be less accurate for nonpartisan elections.

To test our propositions, we use an October *Los Angeles Times* survey that

asks about all statewide offices contested during California's 1998 election cycle.<sup>3</sup> This survey was taken just 2 weeks before voters went to the polls. Among the statewide offices is a nonpartisan post for the superintendent of public instruction. The superintendent is elected on a statewide ballot every 4 years and heads the state board of education and the department of education. The appearance of the question about the superintendent race combined with questions about six low-information statewide partisan offices provides a quasi-experiment for testing the role of party in voter decision making.<sup>4</sup> For the partisan offices, party information was provided to respondents in the following fashion: "If the general election for [office] were being held today and the candidates were [name 1], the Republican, and [name 2], the Democrat, for whom would you vote: [name 1] or [name 2]?" The nonpartisan question was asked without partisan information: "If the general election for superintendent of public instruction were being held today and the candidates were Gloria Matta Tuchman and Delaine Eastin, for whom would you vote: Matta Tuchman or Eastin?"

Candidates were clearly linked to their party in the question for partisan offices, while no mention of party was made in the question about the nonpartisan office.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we can use this survey to judge the importance of party labels to citizen decision making.

In addition to the October survey, the *Los Angeles Times* also conducted three other surveys focusing on state elections during 1998. The April survey is particularly useful for our analysis because in that survey the *Los Angeles Times* mistakenly included the party affiliations of the candidates for superintendent of public instruction.<sup>6</sup> Although the survey was conducted 6 months before the October survey, it should provide an additional baseline for understanding the impact of partisan information on voters' abilities to express candidate preferences in low-information contests. In our analysis of these surveys, we use all respondents who were registered to vote and who said they would definitely or probably vote in the upcoming election. The *Los Angeles Times* uses a more complicated method of determining "likely voters," one that eliminates more independents from the preprimary survey than from the October poll (because independents are less likely to vote in primaries). We ran the same analysis of the October survey with "likely voters" only,

3. The primary survey used in this analysis is *Los Angeles Times* Poll no. 418. The poll of 1,816 respondents was conducted from October 17 to October 21 and was obtained from the Roper Center (USLAT1998-418).

4. The six other offices used in this analysis are the attorney general, controller, insurance commissioner, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and treasurer.

5. The Republican candidate was always listed first in the questions for partisan offices. This pattern may have led respondents to assume correctly that Matta Tuchman was the Republican, because her name was listed first in the question for the nonpartisan office.

6. The survey used in this analysis is *Los Angeles Times* Poll no. 410. The poll of 1,409 respondents was conducted from April 4 to April 9 and was obtained from the Roper Center (USLAT1998-410).

and the results were not substantially different. When discussing survey estimates, we do use the “likely voter” criteria published by the *Los Angeles Times*.

As a final comparative baseline, we also include a Georgia state poll from 1998. We include this survey because Georgia has a partisan superintendent of schools. The inclusion of the Georgia superintendent election provides a comparison with California, because the responsibilities of the offices are quite similar. In both cases, the elected official is responsible for overseeing the public schools and school systems across the state, including evaluation, curriculum, and the budget. By including the Georgia case, we will be able to gauge whether respondents behave differently in expressing their vote choice for the California superintendent because of the nature of the office itself or due to the lack of party labels used by pollsters.<sup>7</sup> The questions for the Georgia poll were asked in a similar manner to those of the California survey and include responses asking for vote choices in the races for superintendent, attorney general, and lieutenant governor.<sup>8</sup>

We use logistic regression to estimate the effects of education on whether respondents choose a candidate in the California survey. Thus, our primary dependent variable is simply coded as a 1 if the respondent expressed a preference for either candidate in the race and coded as a 0 if he or she expressed no such preference.<sup>9</sup> While at least 60 percent of those asked could give a vote preference in each of the California partisan elections, only 46 percent could do so for the nonpartisan office. Even more striking, however, is the difference between responses to the October and April surveys. Although the survey was taken 6 months earlier in the campaign, during a period when fewer people were likely to be thinking about the contest, 62 percent of “likely voters” were willing to state a vote preference in the superintendent race when party labels were provided. Thus, the number of respondents stating a vote preference decreased 17 percent when party labels were not provided, even though California citizens had 6 months to learn more information about the candidates.<sup>10</sup> There appears to be a significant difference between the questions that provide partisan information and those that do not. Our analysis will examine these differences.

7. In both races, an incumbent was running for reelection. Therefore, one does not have to worry about an incumbency advantage benefiting a candidate in one election but not the other.

8. The Georgia State Poll was conducted during October 1998 by the Applied Research Center at Georgia State University. The poll surveyed 778 respondents and is cataloged at the Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Science (NNSP-GA-GS-020).

9. If a voter responded that he or she did not have enough information or that he or she did not know whom he or she would vote for, he or she was coded as expressing no preference. Similar patterns existed for both of these groups.

10. One alternative explanation may be that citizens became less likely to choose a candidate because of information they learned during the campaign. However, in a May survey where party labels were not provided, only 48 percent were willing to state a vote preference in the superintendent contest. Thus, the immediate decline in the percentage of respondents expressing a vote choice makes this alternative explanation unlikely.

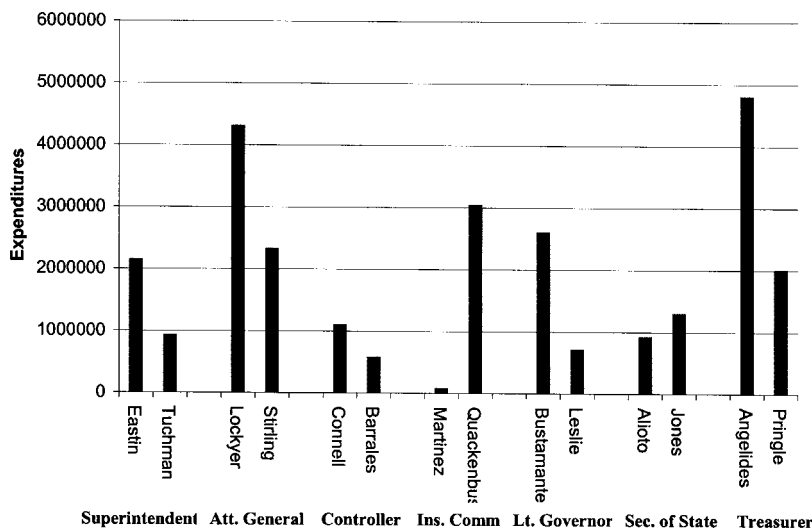
Three independent variables are incorporated to model the ability of a respondent to make a decision in each race.<sup>11</sup> First, education, the primary variable of interest, was coded as an ordinal variable. In the October survey, respondents without a high school degree (3.5 percent) were coded as 1, those with a high school degree only (52.9 percent) received a 2, and respondents with a college degree (43.6 percent) were coded with a 3. We tested several alternate operationalizations for education, and in no case did the findings change substantially. Education should not be a significant factor in the partisan contests, but in the nonpartisan race we expect more educated respondents to be more likely to make a decision (whether they have the information to do so or not). The second independent variable is the level of interest the respondent had in the campaigns.<sup>12</sup> This variable was coded on an ordinal scale with “very uninterested” respondents coded as 1 and those “very interested” coded as 4 (the middle categories were “somewhat uninterested” and “somewhat interested”). We expect respondents to be more likely to make a vote choice as they become more interested in the campaign. The third variable included in the model is a dummy variable for whether the respondent identifies with one of the two major parties (coded 1) or if he or she is an independent (coded 0). In the October survey, 80.6 percent of the respondents identified themselves with one of the parties, while only 19.4 percent considered themselves independents. We expect that party identifiers will be more likely to make a decision in partisan races because they can integrate the partisan information into their decision. However, we believe that this advantage will be nullified when labels are not provided.

## Analysis

Before presenting the results from our model of voter decision making, it is important to understand the information environment within which each of these campaigns took place. It may be the case that voters had substantially less information about the superintendent race than the other statewide campaigns in California; therefore, respondents were not able to gather adequate information to state a preference. For our analysis to be rigorous, similar amounts of information should be available to voters in each of the seven contests. Most citizens gain information about candidates for public office through either paid media or earned (free) media. Therefore, we examine the campaign spending and earned media coverage of each of the candidates in our study.

11. We originally included other independent variables in the model, such as income, race, and gender; however, none of these variables exerted a significant influence on the model, and in no case did their exclusion change the findings.

12. The “interest” variable is a generic question that refers to interest in all the campaigns, not a specific one.



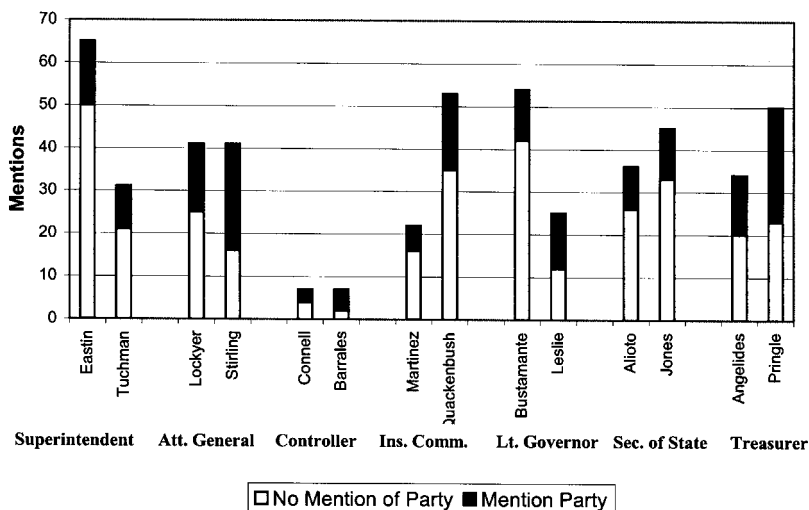
**Figure 1.** Campaign spending in California statewide elections. Based on information from the Office of the Secretary of State (<http://www.ss.ca.gov/prd/>).

Figure 1 presents the campaign expenditures of the Republican and Democratic candidates in each contest. Combined, the candidates for superintendent of public instruction spent over \$3 million during the general election campaign. These expenditures exceed those of the major party candidates for three of the partisan statewide offices: secretary of state, controller, and insurance commissioner. While the spending in the superintendent contest lagged behind the campaigns for lieutenant governor, attorney general, and state treasurer, it was quite competitive with the spending for the partisan offices. These figures indicate that any differences we find between the superintendent contest and the partisan contests are not likely due to differences in campaign spending.

Earned media is also an important source of political information for citizens. Accordingly, we examine the amount of media coverage won by candidates for each office. Figure 2 presents the results from a content analysis of newspaper articles from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*.<sup>13</sup> The bars add to the total of all articles about each candidate. The white area of the bar on each stack is the

13. The content analysis search was performed with Lexis-Nexis on the full text of articles appearing in each of the three newspapers between September 7 (Labor Day) and October 17 (the first day the poll was administered).





**Figure 2.** Mentions of statewide candidates in California newspapers. Based on content analysis of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* from September 7 to October 17, 1998.

share of articles that mentioned each candidate without their name being linked to their party. The shaded area of the bar indicates the number of articles where this connection between candidate and party was made. We considered a candidate’s name to be linked to his or her party if that party was mentioned within five words of his or her name at least once in the article.

The first finding from this figure is that the superintendent race received an amount of coverage comparable with that of the other statewide races that we examine. In fact, Eastin, the incumbent Democrat, received more attention than any other candidate running in these seven elections. While Tuchman, the Republican challenger, was mentioned less often, she still attracted a similar amount of press coverage as a number of other candidates in partisan races. In fact, the least-discussed election was that for controller (with fewer than 10 articles about each candidate), yet 71 percent of “likely voters” expressed a vote preference in that contest, as compared with only 46 percent for the nonpartisan superintendent race. It appears that survey respondents did have an opportunity to gain information about this campaign through newspapers in the state, so the discrepancy among those expressing a vote preference is not the result of an information asymmetry.

Second, the party affiliation of both candidates in the nonpartisan superintendent race was mentioned quite frequently. Tuchman was linked to the Republican Party in approximately 33 percent of her articles, while Eastin

was linked to the Democratic Party in 20 percent of the articles that mentioned her. According to this analysis, it appears that voters had ample opportunity to learn of the party affiliations of both candidates through the print media. In fact, one reporter for the *San Diego Union-Tribune* wrote, "It's officially labeled a nonpartisan office. But voters should easily identify the Democrat and the Republican in the race for state Superintendent of Public Instruction" (Mendel 1998, p. A3).

Not only was it relatively easy to find partisan mentions regarding the superintendent candidates, but the candidates also further distinguished themselves by taking opposing partisan positions on controversial issues. The Democrat (Eastin) strongly opposed school vouchers and supported bilingual education, positions that are consistent with most members of the Democratic Party. The Republican (Tuchman) supported school vouchers and was a cosponsor of Proposition 227, an antibilingual education measure passed by California voters in June of 1998. These positions are consistent with the Republican platform. Even if citizens were not able to explicitly pick up partisan cues, the positions each took on the issues provided strong cues regarding the candidates' party identifications. Adrian (1959) suggested that nonpartisan elections would be less effective in removing partisan influence from voters when candidates were openly linked to parties during the campaign. Because this clearly seems to have occurred during the superintendent race, we might expect less support for our hypotheses.

Despite the amount of information available about the nonpartisan contest, our findings strongly support our hypotheses. Table 1 presents our model of decision making for each contest. Not unexpectedly, the level of interest a respondent had in the campaign was significantly related to his or her ability to make a vote choice for all elections—partisan and nonpartisan. Figure 3 presents the relationship between a respondent's interest in the campaigns and his or her likelihood of choosing either candidate. This figure shows that more interested respondents were more likely to choose a candidate in each of the contests, partisan or nonpartisan. For the partisan offices, respondents with a high level of interest were between 34 percent and 40 percent more likely to express a preference than respondents with little interest in the campaign. For the nonpartisan contest, the effect was less pronounced but still substantial—those with high interest were 25 percent more likely to express a preference than those with little interest in the campaign.

While campaign interest had fairly similar effects across all campaigns, the influence of party and education are not as consistent. The party identifier coefficient is positive and significant in each partisan race but not significant in the nonpartisan contest. Figure 4 presents the influence that identifying with a major political party has on a respondent's predicted likelihood of choosing a candidate in each race. For the partisan races, there is a significantly higher likelihood that a respondent who identifies with the Democratic Party or the Republican Party will be able to state a vote choice in those contests.

**Table 1.** Logit Estimation of Likelihood of Stating a Candidate Preference in California

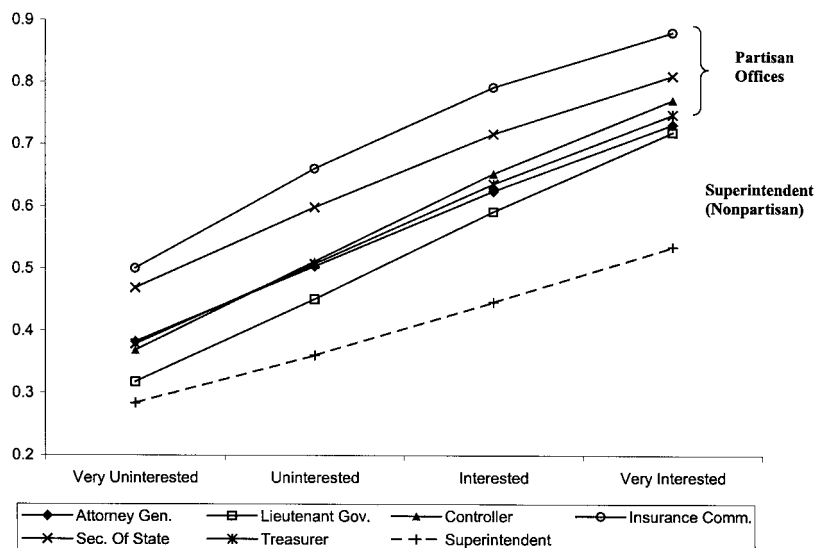
Variable	Superintendent	Attorney General	Lieutenant Governor	Controller	Insurance Commissioner	Secretary of State	Treasurer
California, October ( <i>N</i> = 1,408):							
Party	.10 (.14)	.77*** (.14)	.60*** (.15)	.75*** (.14)	.37* (.16)	.68*** (.14)	.68*** (.14)
Interest	.36*** (.07)	.45*** (.07)	.56** (.07)	.54*** (.07)	.64*** (.08)	.50*** (.07)	.52*** (.07)
Education	.26** (.10)	.07 (.10)	.10 (.10)	.07 (.10)	.17 (.12)	.10 (.11)	.04 (.10)
Intercept	-2.03*** (.33)	-1.63*** (.34)	-2.04*** (.35)	-1.74*** (.34)	-1.29*** (.37)	-1.35*** (.35)	.52*** (.07)
Log likelihood	-946.56	-884.90	-849.75	-853.79	-688.57	-797.81	-878.89
California, April ( <i>N</i> = 1,409):							
Party	.32 (.18)			.58*** (.18)		.27 (.18)	
Interest	.22** (.08)			.24** (.08)		.14 (.12)	
Education	.16 (.12)			.0 (.12)		.21 (.08)	
Intercept	-1.03** (.40)			-.71(.40)		-.63 (.40)	
Log likelihood	-688.35			-665.90		-666.27	

NOTE.—Results are for all registered voters who said they knew they would vote or were pretty sure they would vote. Because the April survey occurred during a primary campaign, we only include analysis from the April survey for contests that were already narrowed to two candidates of opposite parties. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

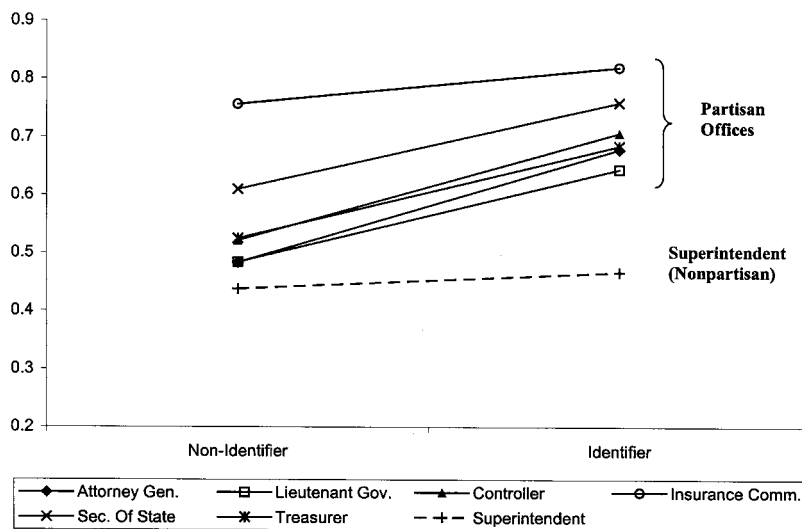
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 3.** Predicted influence of campaign interest on likelihood of choosing a candidate. Predictions are based on analysis in table 1.

When provided with partisan information about the candidates, a respondent who identified with a party could make a vote choice. On the other hand, in the nonpartisan superintendent race, respondents who identified with a party were not significantly more likely to express a preference. Of course, independent respondents found this information less useful and, as a result, they were less likely to express a preference in both the partisan and nonpartisan contests.

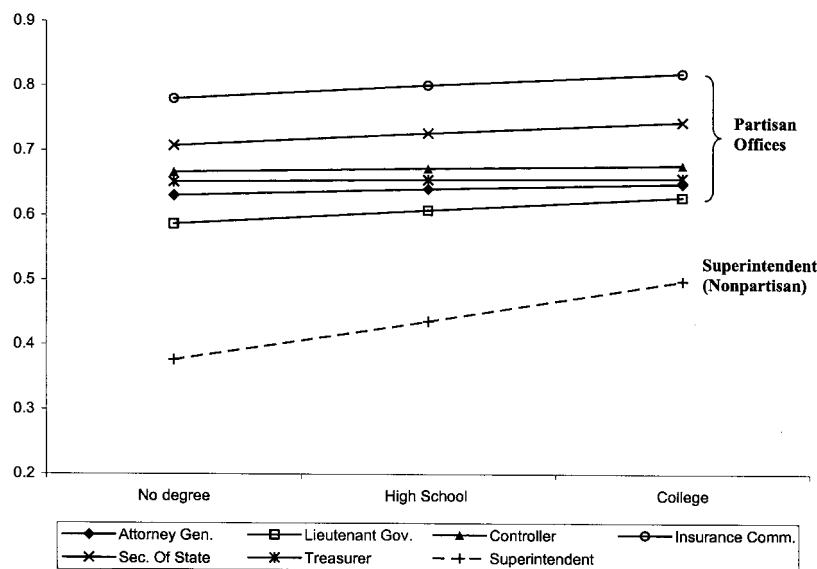
As discussed above, when respondents are not provided with partisan information, they may react by not stating a preference for either candidate, by using other information that they have obtained during the campaign, or by simply guessing. While many respondents did not offer a response when asked about the nonpartisan contest, 46 percent of the respondents did express a preference. The results in table 1 indicate that respondents with more formal education were more likely to state a vote choice in the absence of partisan information than those with less formal education. Education was not a significant influence in races where the interviewer provided partisan information about the candidates. Figure 5 illustrates this relationship. There is no significant effect for education on the likelihood that a respondent will express a vote choice when partisan information is provided. On the other hand, when partisan information was not made available, education has more of an effect.



**Figure 4.** Predicted influence of identifying with a party on likelihood of choosing a candidate. Predictions are based on analysis in table 1.

When asked about the superintendent race, respondents without a high school degree were only 38 percent likely to express a preference, holding all other variables constant. Alternatively, high school graduates were 44 percent likely to make a vote choice, while college graduates were 50 percent likely to do so.

The bottom of table 1 presents the same analysis as above but for the April survey. Because this survey was taken during the primary campaign, we only present findings for the three contests that already included just one candidate from each major party. The findings for the superintendent race are most notable because of the accidental inclusion of party labels in this survey. As expected, education is not significant in this model, indicating that more educated respondents are not significantly more likely to make a choice when party labels are provided. On the other hand, the coefficient for party identifier is positive but marginally not significant (it is significant at  $p < .10$ ). The weaker finding for party identifiers, even with the inclusion of party labels, is not limited to the superintendent campaign; it also arises in the secretary of state contest. This result may be due to the reduced likelihood of independent voters stating that they are likely to vote in a primary as compared with a general election (15 percent of our sample were independents in April, while 19 percent were in October). Nevertheless, in an analysis of the April survey not presented here, party identification was a strongly significant pre-



**Figure 5.** Predicted influence of education on likelihood of choosing a candidate. Predictions are based on analysis in table 1.

dicator of candidate preference in the superintendent election (2.90,  $p < .001$ ). Democratic respondents were significantly more likely to prefer the Democratic candidate, while Republican respondents were more likely to prefer the Republican.

As mentioned above, the partisan superintendent race in Georgia was also included in our analysis in order to gauge whether our results were due to the nature of the office instead of the lack of partisan information provided by the interviewer. One alternative hypothesis is that citizens simply do not approach their vote choice for superintendent of public instruction in a partisan way. If this hypothesis is correct, then we would expect party identifiers to be no more likely to make a decision in the partisan superintendent race than nonidentifiers. However, this alternative hypothesis does not appear to hold. Table 2 indicates that the partisan superintendent race in Georgia behaves no differently than any other partisan contest in our analysis (but quite differently from the nonpartisan California contest). The coefficients for campaign interest and party identifier are both significant and positive, while the coefficient for education is not significant. Furthermore, in an analysis not presented here, party identification was a strongly significant predictor (coefficient of 3.92,  $p < .001$ ) of candidate preference for the partisan superintendent office. Those affiliating with a party were more likely to choose the candidate from their

**Table 2.** Logit Estimation of Likelihood of Stating a Candidate Preference in Georgia ( $N = 608$ )

Variable	Superintendent	Attorney General	Lieutenant Governor
Party	.97*** (.18)	.92*** (.18)	.64** (.19)
Interest	.64*** (.13)	.76** (.13)	.66*** (.13)
Education	.18 (.19)	-.04 (.18)	.26 (.20)
Intercept	-1.68** (.50)	-1.59*** (.49)	-1.46** (.52)
Log likelihood	-353.92	-367.08	-333.88

NOTE.—Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

party. Thus, the comparison between other state offices in California and a similar (but partisan) office in Georgia allows us to be fairly confident that it is the lack of partisan information supplied to respondents that is affecting their behavior.

The evidence from our quasi-experimental design is fairly convincing—citizens, particularly less educated citizens, are less likely to state a vote preference when partisan information is unavailable. Two contrasting possibilities arise from this finding. On one hand, more educated citizens may have had alternative information upon which to make a vote choice even without receiving partisan information from the interviewer. On the other hand, this finding may simply indicate that more educated respondents are less likely to admit that they “don’t know” what their preferences are. We will attempt to sort out these alternatives in the analysis to follow.

Table 3 presents results from two models. The top of the table presents the coefficients from a model testing whether more educated and more interested respondents were more likely to link their party to their candidate preference in this contest. The dependent variable for candidate preference is coded 1 if the respondent chose the Democratic candidate and 0 if he or she chose the Republican. The independent variable for party is coded 1 if the respondent was a Democrat and 0 if he or she was a Republican. We include interactions between the variable for party and the variables for interest and education to gauge whether respondents are more likely to link their candidate preference to their party depending on their education or interest in the campaign. In the superintendent model, the coefficients for party, education, interest, and the interactions are not significant. This nonfinding indicates that respondents are not more likely to link their party to their vote preference when they have

**Table 3.** Logit Estimation of Candidate Preference for Statewide Offices in California

Variable	Superintendent	Attorney General	Lieutenant Governor	Controller	Insurance Commissioner	Secretary of State	Treasurer
Interactions model:							
Party	1.31 (1.46)	4.98*** (1.07)	5.06** (1.71)	5.66* (1.91)	.0 (1.06)	3.92*** (1.23)	3.48* (1.49)
Education	.17 (.28)	.26 (.30)	.36 (.32)	.30 (.27)	-.20 (.26)	.48 (.27)	-.18 (.31)
Party × education	-.22 (.43)	.04 (.43)	.30 (.48)	-.72 (.53)	.65* (.32)	-.20 (.36)	.65 (.42)
Interest	-.40 (.21)	.09 (.22)	.04 (.23)	-.14 (.19)	-.05 (.19)	-.16 (.18)	-.07 (.22)
Party × interest	.44 (.31)	-.24 (.34)	-.38 (.39)	-.05 (.41)	.38 (.23)	.05 (.27)	-.23 (.34)
Intercept	.83 (1.02)	-2.60* (1.06)	-2.71* (1.14)	-1.11 (.92)	-1.05 (.89)	-2.27* (.91)	-1.1 (1.04)
Observations	511	741	670	560	884	827	750
Log likelihood	-234.58	-240.67	-207.44	-210.60	-437.90	-334.61	-247.09
Bivariate model:							
Party	2.28*** (.23)	4.27*** (.24)	4.45** (.27)	3.79*** (.25)	2.80*** (.17)	3.58*** (.20)	4.24** (.24)
Intercept	-.09 (.15)	-1.66*** (.16)	-1.70*** (.16)	-.82*** (.12)	-1.71*** (.14)	-1.61*** (.14)	-1.80*** (.16)
Observations	515	747	674	778	895	836	758
Log likelihood	-237.64	-242.25	-210.39	-278.91	-450.61	-338.60	-251.90

NOTE.—The results for the interaction model do not change when you exclude one set of interactive variables. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



higher levels of education or interest in the campaign. We also tested each interactive effect while excluding the other and still found no significant effects. In fact, the only significant interaction term was in the contest for insurance commissioner, where the interviewer did provide party labels.

The bottom part of table 3 presents a simple bivariate model between party identification and candidate preference for respondents who made a decision in each of the statewide races. These results exclude education, interest, and the interaction terms. It is interesting that party identification is a significant predictor of candidate preference in each contest, though the strength of the coefficient varies. Specifically, the smallest partisan effect occurred when partisan information was not provided to the respondent. The coefficients for party identification in the partisan races varied between 2.80 for the insurance commissioner contest and 4.44 in the race for attorney general. On the other hand, the coefficient for the nonpartisan race was only 2.28, indicating that respondents were less likely to choose the candidate from their party in the superintendent race than in the partisan races.

While partisanship had a significant influence on the likelihood that a respondent would choose a candidate from the same party in the nonpartisan race, it had a weaker effect than when partisan information was provided. Furthermore, respondents with more education were not significantly more likely to link their partisanship to their candidate preference. This finding appears to indicate that removing partisan information from a vote-choice question has a number of different effects. First, fewer respondents are likely to state a preference in the absence of partisan information. Second, those who do state a preference tend to have more formal education. It may be the case that the more educated respondents had alternative sources of information upon which they based their candidate preferences. On the other hand, the effect of education in this case may be less related to knowledge and more related to a respondent's need to conform to the social norm of political participation (a need that is often heightened among the higher educated). Our third key finding was that more educated respondents were not significantly more likely to prefer candidates from their own party. Thus, it is unclear whether these respondents were simply guessing or basing their candidate preferences on something other than partisanship.

One consequence of the effects mentioned above is a mismatch between survey estimates and election outcomes. Table 4 presents the level of support expressed for the Democratic and Republican candidates for each office in the survey as compared with the final vote percentage on election day. One striking finding from this table is the variation in how closely the survey estimates match the actual vote totals. For the partisan offices, the estimated vote share according to the survey compares fairly well with the election results. The difference between the actual margin of victory and the margins estimated in the October survey ranged from 2 percent to 6 percent for the

**Table 4.** Survey Estimate Mismatch in the 1998 California Election

Office	Survey Responses (%)			Votes Cast in Election (%)		Estimate Mismatch (%)
	Democratic Vote	Republican Vote	Undecided	Democratic Vote	Republican Vote	
Superintendent	34	12	54	54	46	14
Attorney General	41	28	31	52	42	3
Lieutenant Governor	35	26	35	53	39	-6
Controller	47	24	29	61	33	-5
Insurance Commissioner	38	46	16	44	50	2
Secretary of state	39	37	24	46	47	-3
Treasurer	39	32	28	53	40	-6

NOTE.—The survey responses are from “likely voters” as defined by the *Los Angeles Times* (Decker 1998b). We define estimate mismatch as the difference between the margin between the candidates in the October survey (without allocating undecided voters) and the margin on election day (Mitofsky 1998).

partisan offices.<sup>14</sup> These mismatches between survey estimates and election outcomes are somewhat large and are likely to be due to voters relying heavily on party cues 2 weeks before a low-salience election (Crespi 1988; Erikson and Sigelman 1995). However, the mismatch for the nonpartisan contest was much greater. The survey, taken 2 weeks before the election, showed a gap of 22 percent between the candidates (34 percent and 12 percent, Decker 1998b). On election day, the actual results were much closer (54 percent and 46 percent). The mismatch for the nonpartisan office (the gap in the survey minus the gap in the actual contest) was 14 percent. After examining newspaper articles, we found no obvious event during the last few days of the campaign after the survey was conducted that would have prompted such a swing. Thus, we can likely attribute some part of this difference to respondents who either did not select either candidate in the survey but did so in the general election or chose a different candidate in the survey than they did on election day.

The survey taken in April is also notable. In that survey, which included the party affiliations of the candidates for superintendent, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that among “likely voters,” Eastin held a 16 percentage advantage (39 percent and 23 percent, Decker 1998a). This estimate was quite accurate as compared with the actual vote in the June primary, when Eastin finished 17 percent ahead of Tuchman (43 percent and 26 percent). The estimated gap for the April survey was just 1 percent smaller than that in the primary, a vast improvement over the October survey and still slightly better than a May survey that estimated a 15 percent margin. The April survey was also an improvement over those of May and October with regard to undecided respondents. In the April survey, 38 percent of the respondents were undecided in the superintendent race, while that number was 59 percent in May and 54 percent in October. Other factors, such as campaign dynamics, may have led to the differences in undecided respondents and mismatched survey estimates. Yet, it is likely that the inclusion of party affiliations in the April survey was at least partially responsible for these effects.

It is interesting that the error in the October survey for the nonpartisan contest was biased toward the incumbent—a 22 percent advantage for Eastin in the survey was just 8 percent on election day. In the absence of partisan information, respondents search for any other information they might obtain. In this case, they may have been responding to a recognizable name (Eastin had been in office for 4 years) more than anything else. Of course, since we have only one race where partisan information was not provided, we cannot support this hypothesis. But previous research has demonstrated a significantly greater incumbency advantage in nonpartisan elections (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). This advantage may be even greater in preelection surveys

14. We use the method recommended by Mitofsky (1998) to look at the mismatch between preelection polls and election results.

weeks before the election when respondents have not had a chance to learn more information about the candidates.

Table 4 also lists the percentage of respondents who did not make a choice in the survey. Again, 54 percent of the respondents were not willing to express a vote preference for superintendent in the survey. The next highest percentage of undecided respondents was 35 percent in the race for lieutenant governor. Similar differences exist when one examines roll-off—those turning out but not voting for a particular office—in the general election. While roll-off was less than 9 percent for each of the partisan offices, it was quite high for the nonpartisan contest (25 percent). Thus, the absence of partisan information on the ballot in November seems to have kept quite a few citizens from voting for the office of superintendent of public instruction. Perhaps, similarly to the survey respondents, citizens in the voting booth may decide not to vote when party labels are not on the ballot.

Our analysis has revealed a number of interesting patterns with regard to citizen decision making in the absence of partisan information. First, party identifiers are likely to choose a candidate when partisan information is provided about the candidates, but this is not the case when no partisan information is available. Second, more educated respondents are more likely to choose a candidate in the absence of partisan information than those with less formal education. Third, the influence of a respondent's party on his or her candidate preference was smallest for the contest where partisan information was not provided, an indication that some respondents may have been stating their vote intentions blindly. Fourth, there was a higher mismatch between preelection estimates and the actual vote for the nonpartisan race. And fifth, one-quarter of the electorate did not cast a vote for the nonpartisan contest during the general election—this was three times as much roll-off as for any partisan office.

## Conclusion

The findings we present above have important implications. For academics and the media, it is important to emphasize that survey estimates may be less accurate when they focus on low-information contests before respondents have acquired and studied information on those campaigns. However, when vote-choice questions reveal partisan cues about the candidates, this inaccuracy is far less than when labels are not provided. When surveys provide partisan information, respondents appear to use that knowledge to infer what their vote choice will be, and they tend to be fairly accurate with their inferences. On the other hand, when respondents were not given partisan cues, many were unwilling (or unable) to state a preference for either candidate. Because the vote-choice question without partisan information led to fewer responses and some responses that may have been guesses, the mismatch between the survey

estimates and the actual results on election day was substantial. While the survey estimated a 22 percent divide among the electorate, the gap in the final election results was just 8 percent. The polls estimated a large lead for Eastin when the contest actually appeared to be much closer—a fact that may have affected campaign dynamics and, subsequently, voters' decisions on election day.

Academics and the media should be aware that surveys might accurately estimate candidate support in low-information contests when they provide partisan cues to respondents, but these estimations may be less accurate when no such information is provided. This is particularly important for journalists who should be cautious when interpreting preelection polls for nonpartisan contests. Warning citizens that such estimates may be less accurate due to respondents' lack of information and a higher propensity to remain undecided seems reasonable given the results we present here. In addition, our analysis points toward a need for further research in this area. While our findings are suggestive, they are not conclusive. In the future, research might use split-sample surveys that provide half of the respondents with partisan information to better understand how that information affects the estimates of vote preferences.

For those worried about low participation in our democratic system, nonpartisan elections may be cause for concern. On November 3, 1998, 2.3 million voters who had already bothered to go to the polls did not cast a vote in the superintendent race. For comparison, the partisan office with the highest roll-off was for state treasurer. In that election, 700,000 voters did not cast a vote. Roll-off in the superintendent race was three times as large as that in the partisan office with the highest roll-off. Providing partisan information not only increases the share of people responding to survey questions, but it also increases the share of voters who cast a vote for a particular office. Citizens appear to be at a disadvantage when labels are removed from the ballot.

In sum, as political scientists debate the relevance of political parties in the United States, our findings suggest that scholars warning of the disappearance of parties may be overstating their case. In particular, some scholars have argued that parties are significantly less relevant for voters in the present day (Wattenberg 1996). In response, Bartels (2000) and Campbell (2001) provide compelling evidence that, at the presidential level, partisan voting remains quite prominent. Our findings are compatible with the work of Bartels and Campbell. Citizens still rely on party labels a great deal when making decisions on whether and for whom to vote—especially when they lack other information. This cue helps voters not only to participate but also to participate intelligently in our political system. Without the party label, voters become less likely to vote and less able to link their own party affiliations to their vote choices.

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