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Title	Ballot paper photographs and low-information elections in Ireland
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Publication date	2007-10-01
Original Citation	Buckley, F., Collins, N., Reidy, T., 2007. Ballot paper photographs and low-information elections in Ireland. Politics, 27(3), pp.174-181. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9256.2007.00297.x
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.blackwell-synergy.com - 10.1111/j.1467-9256.2007.00297.x
Rights	Journal compilation © 2007 Political Studies Association and Blackwell Publishing Ltd
Download date	2026-11-06 13:41:26
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/31



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The definitive version is available at www.blackwell-synergy.com

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Ballot Paper Photographs and Low Information Elections in Ireland

In an attempt to facilitate greater voting participation in the Republic of Ireland, photographs of candidates have been placed on the ballot paper for local, national and European elections. Limited research undertaken in advance of the implementation of the photograph policy advised that the measure would assist people with literacy problems. However, social psychology research has long demonstrated that people are willing to make considerable judgements about a person when shown a photograph. The advent of ballot paper photographs allows candidates to be evaluated on the basis of their appearance. This paper will explore how photographs could have become a factor in voter decision-making. Providing additional knowledge to encourage greater participation and engagement, has introduced a possible new level of superficiality into the voter decision-making process.

Introduction

Photographs of candidates were placed on ballot papers for elections in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) from 1999. The decision to include photographs was informed by arguments that voters with literacy difficulties would be assisted in their voting. Photographs were also identified as a measure to alleviate a problem, specific to the Irish context, of many candidates of the same name appearing on the ballot paper.

Research undertaken after the 1999 election confirmed a positive reaction of all voters to the photographs and specific support for the measure from voters with literacy difficulties (Lansdowne Market Research 2000). However, this research was based on the assumption that voters recognise their politicians or local political candidates. The research did caution policy makers that the measure could strengthen a candidate

centred bias in Irish elections. In response to this advice, a decision was taken in the Electoral Amendment Act (2000) to include party logos to offset any increase in candidate centred politics (Dáil Debates (21/2/2001).

Research into voter recognition of politicians has undermined the assumption of widespread recognition. A survey, using photographs of members of the European Parliament (MEPs), undertaken after the 1999 European elections found that less than half of the electorate recognised three or more candidates after the election. The authors concluded that only a small number of voters were equipped with sufficient information for the photographs to be of assistance (Lansdowne Market Research 2000). A further study undertaken in 2005 presented similarly low levels of recognition amongst voters for their European Parliament candidates (Lansdowne Market Research 2005), even though many of the candidates contesting the 2004 European elections were politicians holding prominent posts at national and local level in Ireland.

The paper has a number of objectives. It will argue that voters are not always sufficiently informed to use candidate photographs to aid their voting decision-making. Evidence from social psychology will be presented to show that people are willing to make important decisions based upon only photographs. The research will further argue that in the context of low information elections, there is a possibility that photographs could have an undue influence in the way in which voters arrive at a voting decision.

The arguments will be supported by evidence gained from an experimental election study conducted at the 2004 local elections in Ireland, when candidate recognition could be expected to be quite low. The abolition of the dual mandate, which allowed national parliamentarians to hold local council seats, prior to the election, resulted in a sharp increase in first time candidates. Few of these candidates would have had political profile in advance of the campaign. An election survey was undertaken in which voters were asked to vote for candidates using only ballot paper photographs. The results of the survey indicate a number of important trends. Most significantly, it shows that voters are willing to express a political preference when presented with only photographs of political candidates.

Political Information and the Possible Role of Photographs

The literature on political knowledge indicates that voters have different levels of political information and those with sophisticated understanding of the political environment are greatly outnumbered by those with limited information and interest (Kinder and Palfrey 1993). However, political scientists have been reluctant to ascribe a role to:

> vague impressions – this, despite the fact that there is considerable evidence to the effect that voters have very little detailed information about party policies and have vague impressions of party performance…images have also been underplayed because they are difficult to measure independently of voter choice, so that their causal status is problematic. (Bartle and Griffiths 2002: 30)

Despite the reluctance among political scientists to ascribe a role to photographic images, insights from social psychology indicate that people are quite willing to base important judgement on the basis of photographic information. Some psychological literature "…suggests…nonverbal behaviour accompanying a communication is at

least as influential as the verbal content…in determining how an individual is perceived" (Rosenberg et al 1991: 346). Rosenberg et al found that photographic information can be used by voters to influence their candidate choice.

Individual perceptions of the various aspects of photographs may then play a significant mediating role in the translation of faces into votes. In earlier research, Rosenberg et al. (1986: 108) had demonstrated that a single photograph was sufficient for respondents to arrive at a definite judgment of the subject's character.

> Physical appearance can produce a clear image of that individual's character…a single photograph is sufficient to create a distinct and reliable image of the person.

They concluded that an individual's appearance communicated "a clear and politically relevant image of that person's character" to voters, including an impression of fitness for office (Rosenberg et al 1986: 114).

Much of the work on the impact of the judgments of "voters" made on the basis of photographs seeks to measure prejudice especially on racial, ethnic or gender grounds. Again, this work is largely experimental and outside the context of actual elections but it does show, for instance, that black candidates were penalised by white voters based on race or skin colour (Terkildsen 1993).

Many of the articles cited above are over two decades old and there is a real need to update the work in this area. More recent research by Banducci et al (2003) has again identified that candidate attractiveness can be a determinant of voter choice. They

argue that a number of other factors play a more important role, including the electoral system and ballot position effects. Their research focused on low-information elections and the cues that voters will employ in this context to aid their decision making.

Low Information Elections and Voting Cues

Low information elections are elections which do not involve significant constitutional office and do not attract large scale media coverage. Research on low information elections has established that voters compensate for a lack of political knowledge by taking cognitive shortcuts to make voting decisions. Photographs of candidates have been identified as a cognitive shortcut in a number of studies.

McDermott (2005: 201) suggests "voters in low-information elections frequently rely on heuristics or information shortcuts when making their decisions of whom to support". Voters economise by using political and social stereotypes to judge candidates. Using basic information about candidates - party affiliation, incumbent/challenger status, elite endorsement - the voter "can associate a candidate with a political and/or social group and project onto the candidate such things as issue positions they believe the group holds" (McDermott, 1998:898). Popkin (1991) and McDermott (1998) examined the importance of demographic cues on voter decision making in low information contexts. Candidate demographic cues are readily available to voters. A name on a ballot paper can indicate gender. A picture in campaign literature can inform a voter of a candidate's gender, race, age and physical attractiveness. Using this information, voters "are provided with stereotypical information that can help them choose between candidates" (McDermott, 1998: 912).

Extensive research confirms the impact of ballot position upon the number of votes obtained by candidates. There is a tendency among voters to prefer candidates whose names appear at the top of the ballot, compared with lower placed candidates. Koppel and Steen (2004:267) in a study of the New York 1998 Democratic primaries showed that:

> candidates received a greater proportion of the vote when listed first than when listed in any other position. In seven of those 71 contests the advantage to first position exceeded the winner's margin of victory.

In their research, Miller and Krosnick (1998) show that position effect is particularly prominent in low information elections when party affiliations are not listed, races have been minimally publicised, and no incumbent is involved.

Positional voting bias is of special importance in preferential voting systems such as Ireland's proportional representation-single-transferable vote system (PR-STV), under which voters may indicate their first, second, third, etc., preferences among a list of candidates. Robson and Walsh (1974), Marsh (1987) and Bowler and Farrell (1991) all provide evidence of positional voting at Irish elections. Their work has demonstrated that candidates positioned higher on the ballot paper enjoy an advantage over their fellow candidates. Positional voting was not controlled for in this study and the results displayed may include an element of this effect.

Ballot Paper Experiment

The June 2004 local election in Ireland was unusual for two reasons. First, as a local election it falls into the category of second order elections but in addition, it was an especially low-information election. Second, the abolition of the dual mandate removed many well known national politicians from the election context. Several candidates appeared on the ballot paper for the first time and would have been relatively unknown. This undermines the candidate recognition arguments used to support the introduction of the ballot paper photographs.

Two replica ballot papers were developed for the survey. The first ballot paper contained only photographs of local election candidates. Names and party logos were removed. The photographs were of candidates from a different electoral area than that surveyed and candidates would have been unknown to the survey respondents. In the second ballot paper the same candidates appeared but with their party affiliations. This ballot paper acted as a control. In all, there were twelve candidates on the paper, nine men and three women. Respondents were asked to give their own gender and age.

The survey was administered at three polling stations on the day of the election. Two urban polling stations and a rural polling station were used. Turnout on the day of the election exceeded 60% in all three polling stations and a sample of 621 was achieved. The total registered electorate at the three polling stations was 7495, resulting in a sample size of 0.83%. Turnout was unusually high in June 2004 in comparison to previous local elections. European Parliament elections and a constitutional referendum were held on that day, in part explaining the higher turnout. The higher

turnout on the day generated a larger sample size. The refusal rate was just over 3% and the sampling error was ±3.77%.

There are a number of remarks that must be made in relation to the data collected. First, and most significant, the respondents of the survey were voters. Respondents were approached outside the polling station, after they had completed their voting. Second the photographs on the ballot paper were of actual local election candidates. All of the data was collected on the same day. Furthermore, in using actual voters and candidates, it was possible to compare the results of the *real* election with those of the survey. The final point is that the use of real candidates and voters enhances the external validity of the research.

In the first instance, the survey demonstrates that large numbers of people are willing to make judgements based upon photographs of individuals. The most notable outcome of the survey was the similarity of the results of the actual election and the survey. PR-STV counts were undertaken for each of the polling stations. Table one labels candidates alphabetically and includes gender labels. This is the order in which the candidates appeared on the ballot paper.

Table 1 Candidate Information

Candidate Label	**Gender**
Candidate A	Male
Candidate B	Male
Candidate C	Male
Candidate D	Female
Candidate E	Male
Candidate F	Female
Candidate G	Female
Candidate H	Male
Candidate I	Male
Candidate J	Male

Candidate K	Male
Candidate L	Male

Table two outlines the results of the election and of the survey. The actual election results from June 2004 appear in column two. Columns three and four outline the final results of the PR-STV counts that were conducted on the sample ballot papers.

Table 2 Local Election and Election Survey Results

Order of election	**Local Election Result (June 2004)**	**Survey Result (photographs only)**	**Survey Result (photographs & party affiliation)**
1	Candidate I	Candidate I	Candidate G
2	Candidate K	Candidate G	Candidate F
3	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate I
4	Candidate G	Candidate D (same vote as K)	Candidate D
5	Candidate D	Candidate K(same vote as D)	Candidate A

There is a remarkable similarity between the election results and the results of the ballot paper survey. Four out of the five candidates elected in the *real* election were selected in the survey. These results (column three) were obtained from the sample ballot papers, which contained only photographs of the candidates. The second sample ballot paper was deployed in an urban polling station. It included party affiliations. Here also, four out of the five candidates were selected. An additional female candidate was selected where the party label was known.

Table 3 Analysis of First Preference Votes

Order of First Preferences	**Local Election Result (June 2004)**	**Survey Result (photographs only)**	**Survey Result (photographs & party affiliation)**
1	Candidate I	Candidate I	Candidate G
2	Candidate K	Candidate G	Candidate F

3	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate I
4	Candidate D	Candidate D	Candidate A
5	Candidate B	Candidate K	Candidate D

An analysis of the just first preference votes provides a slightly different pattern but the same candidates appear.

There is one caveat which must be inserted in relation to the results of the PR-STV counts. It is possible, and likely, that some of the results replication may be occurring as a result of positional voting. This is an important limitation of the experiment. At the next testing, positional voting will be controlled for using survey designs with randomized positioning of candidates.

Discussion

The introduction of new measures to encourage voting is of course to be welcomed. However, in this instance a number of questions must be raised about the way in which voters are using ballot paper photographs. These concerns are especially valid in the context of low information elections. If voters do not recognise the candidates, the question of how they use the photographs must be raised.

The results of the ballot paper survey have shown that when given only candidate photographs, survey respondents replicated an election result with 80% accuracy. This result was found in both of the replica ballot papers. Candidates were not selected in the same order as the actual election but the final outcome was very similar. It is difficult to make any comment on the process of transfers as the sample size is too small to facilitate this with any degree of confidence. In a direct comparison of first preference votes a similar pattern emerges. The sample ballot with only photographs

produces an 80% replication with the election, although again in a slightly different order. The sample ballot with photographs and party logos produces a lower effect with three out of the five elected candidates being selected.

The finding could suggest that voters include ballot paper photographs in their decision making process. The experiment was conducted at a low information election and many of the voters would have had no information on the candidates. Photographs would have been unlikely to prompt any additional political information. The literature provides persuasive evidence that in a low information context, voters will draw on cognitive shortcuts including photographs. The question which arises is what information are voters deriving from the photographs.

Ireland has a particularly candidate centred electoral context. In fact, when photographs were being placed on the ballot paper, party logos were also included as a measure to counteract a possible increase in candidate centred evaluations arising from the photographs. The survey ballot paper which included party logos did give a slightly different overall result, with an additional female candidate being selected. However, four out of the five candidates elected, were still selected using this survey.

A number of general conclusions can be drawn from the survey. Voters were willing to make political selections in a survey based on only photographic information. Photographs were used even when they brought no additional factual information to the survey respondents. The reasoning behind the photographs was that they would prompt voters with extra information (political party, name, location, personal knowledge of the candidate). However, in a low information context where little is

actually known about the candidates, photographs provide only image related cues. It remains to be seen how voters interpret this information and what biases it contributes to the overall electoral process. It is unlikely that policy makers intended that photographs would be used in this way which must lead to a conclusion that in low information elections, ballot paper photographs are having unknown effects which may be undesirable.

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