A Preanalysis Plan for "Assessing Political Influence: Evidence from a Survey Experiment"*

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March 3, 2021

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1 Introduction

This document describes plans for conducting and analyzing two survey experiments intended to explore constituents' assessment of politically influential candidates running for state legislative office. The results of these analyses will be detailed in a paper and dissertation chapter entitled "Assessing the Value of Political Influence to Voters: Evidence from a Survey Experiment." In this research, I broadly examine how voters evaluate a candidate's level of persuasive authority, or political influence, relative to other typically significant qualities that affect voting decisions. These include party affiliation, gender, and race. Specifically, I test whether political influence contributes to vote choice, as well as the degree to which voters perceive the representational tensions involved in maintaining such a reputation. Despite the tradeoffs required to build and retain influence in legislative settings, I expect that respondents will nonetheless prefer influential representation to those with lower institutional status.

Theoretically, this paper expands on existing work in several ways. First, this project examines the value of influence – a valuable intralegislative heuristic (Kingdon 1973; Matthews and Stimson 1975) – from the perspective of

*This plan is associated with the paper titled "Assessing the Value of Political Influence to Voters: Evidence from a Survey Experiment.."

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constituents. Existing research demonstrates the pervasive value and correlates of influence to legislative actors, but has yet to approach this question from the perspective of the represented population. In other words, while influence is visible and widely used by political actors as a means of information sharing, this project asks how constituents use that trait to inform their voting decisions. Second, I put influence into a tradeoff context to determine respondents' representational preferences. In short, influence requires credibility and professional rapport, which must be maintained through consistent, highly visible activity. As a result, these legislators may be less able to provide certain types of representation, such as constituency service, which necessitate spending more time in the district and less time at the capitol. Despite the democratic concerns inherent in this secondary contribution, I nonetheless expect respondents to demonstrate a preference for influential representation.

I address the question of how influence contributes to candidate evaluation with two survey experiments. In the first, I use a conjoint design in which respondents are presented with two hypothetical candidate profiles. In the second, I use a vignette approach to give respondents more detailed information regarding the tradeoffs inherent in building and maintaining an influential reputation to test their preference for influential candidates in the context of a representational tradeoff. The use of both conjoint and traditional vignette experiments improves upon results generated with just one approach by providing richer detail with a additional test of the motivating research question for this project: how much – and at what costs– do Americans assess political power and influence as voters? Together, these experiments will jointly show both how constituents conceive of political influence in their electoral preferneces and the extent to which the value of political influence is moderated by other, competing representational tensions.

In this document, I explain the survey, population, and experimental design of both methodologies. I also describe the planned analyses and expected results. As of this writing, I have not yet received the survey data nor begun any analyses. Consequently, the following plan is agnostic to the observed results.

2 Study Information

The survey questions and analyses described below are intended to assess the following theoretical expectations. Competing hypotheses H_{1a} and H_{1b} are tested using data from the conjoint experiment and H_2 – H_4 will be tested using the vignette results.

> H_{1a}: *Greater influence* $\rightarrow$ *high probability of candidate selection.* Because influence often coincides with incumbency and experience, traits that voters typically prefer, overall ratings of influential candidates should be higher than for those with less influence (Fowler, Douglass and Clark 1980; Grimmer and Powell 2013; Kirkland and Coppock 2018).

H_{1b}: *Greater influence → low probability of candidate selection.* Constituents have diverse representational preferences, some of which may not be satisfied by influence. In addition, influence may detract from legislators' ability to provide some representational goods, which could make that quality less attractive to constituents (Griffin and Flavin 2011; Harden 2016).

H_2: *Influential conditions → higher evaluation of candidate's representational capacity.* Due to the normative preference for status in American politics as well as the association of influence with other traits such as incumbency, experience, or expertise, I expect respondents with influential treatments to report a higher expected level of representation, regardless of whether a tradeoff is expressed in the vignette (Grimmer and Powell 2013; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Harden 2016).

H_3: *Influential treatments → no change in evaluation with tradeoff frame.* Following from hypothesis 1, I expect no significant difference between respondents assigned to "influential" conditions, namely the presence of a tradeoff. I expect this result due to the normative preference for status in American politics as well as the association of influence with other traits such as incumbency, experience, or expertise. (Curry 2015, 2018; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Fong 2020).

H_4: *Non-influential treatments → tradeoff frame produces significant differences.* As a corollary to the preceding hypothesis, I expect respondents assigned to "not influential" conditions to demonstrate significant differences across the tradeoff conditions. This follows from my general expectation for respondents to prefer influential representation at all costs. In this case, given that the candidate is not influential, I expect respondents' representational preferences to become more important than when evaluating an influential candidate (Harden 2016; Kirkland and Coppock 2018).

3 Analytical Approach

3.1 Surveys & Population

To address these theoretical questions, I use two survey experiments. Both experiments were fielded on two, nationally representative surveys each with approximately 1,000 respondents: the 2020 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and a survey run by YouGov, a private research firm. After accounting for attrition, I expect the total size of both samples to be about 750, or 1,500 total. Financial support for the 2020 CCES battery comes from the Department of Political Science and the University of Notre Dame. The second survey is funded and administered by the Political Science Department at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. Both surveys are currently underway. I have not yet received or seen the data, nor have I begun analysis.

Question wording across both surveys was identical. Additionally, both batteries were fielded in two waves, one

preceding the 2020 election and one following it. The conjoint experiment was fielded on the pre-election survey with the vignette appearing on the post-election wave. This setup was selected to minimize the impact of priming on results. The design of question items and planned data analyses follow below. In addition, I will use respondents' basic, self-reported demographic data in my analyses, in addition to the manipulated variables described. Both experiments are single-blind; as such, treatment assignment is not disclosed to human subjects but will be documented for analytical purposes. This research was deemed exempt by the IRB at the University of Notre Dame, status approved on November 9, 2020.

3.2 Conjoint Experimental Design

I use a within-subjects (paired), choice-based conjoint experiment to establish a baseline effect for constituents' preference for influential candidates. Here, respondents are presented with two candidate profiles and asked to indicate which they would most likely select in a real electoral scenario. They may choose between either of the two profiles, but must select one. In the special instructions for this question, I noted the following:

> "This is a choice-based conjoint experiment. Each respondent should view the introductory text once, then see the table below 5 times, with different traits appearing at random in each cell in columns 2 and 3. Please record which traits appear in each cell at each iteration. The features in column 1 of the table should be presented in random order for each respondent, but that order should remain constant across all 5 iterations for a given respondent."

3.2.1 Manipulated variables

This item is intended to serve as a proxy for respondents' evaluation of candidates in a competitive electoral context. In the hypothetical profiles, participants are presented with seven individual traits: age, race/ethnicity, gender, college degree earned, profession, political party affiliation, and degree of influence over other legislators' decisions. The order of candidate qualities is randomized along with the value of each trait in order to ensure equal likelihood across each possible profile. However, the order in which the traits iappear on each for each respondent is constant in order to improve legibility (e.g., if age is the first trait on the first set of profiles, it will be the first trait on the each subsequent pair). The possible values of each trait are provided in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

3.2.2 Measured variables

In this experiment, I measure the discrete contribution of political influence to respondents' candidate selection. For each set of profiles, the outcome is dichotomous: respondents may choose between either of the two profiles, but must select one.

3.2.3 Planned Analysis: Average Component Marginal Effect (ACME)

To analyze these data, I will conduct a linear regression where the dependent variable is the average marginal component effect (ACME) and the key independent variable of interest is the level of candidate influence. This quantity will show the average effect of trichotomized influence (trait of interest) on the probability that a candidate

is chosen. Here, the average effect of influence is defined over the joint distribution of the six other candidate traits (age, race/ethnicity, gender, college degree earned, profession, and political party affiliation) across repeated samples (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). This statistic will allow me to test the importance of influence to constituents by estimating the contribution of influence to positive or negative candidate evaluations. In addition, this test will also permit comparison between the discrete value of influence with other, well-established predictors of constituent preferences. Together, these tests jointly inform the competing hypotheses to be adjudicated in this part of the project by first showing the independent contribution of candidate preferences, whether positive or negative, and how that effect compares to other traits.

3.3 Vignette Experimental Design

To evaluate hypotheses $H_2 - H_4$, I use a mixed vignette design. Here, respondents are assigned to one of five possible conditions designed to test their preference for influential candidates in the context of a representational tradeoff.

3.3.1 Manipulated variables

For the vignettes administered on the post-election wave, respondents will be assigned to one of five possible conditions designed to test their evaluation of influence against an inherent representational tradeoff: (1) control, (2) influential/tradeoff, (3) influential/no tradeoff, (4) not influential/tradeoff, or (5) not influential/no tradeoff. After reading the vignette associated with each condition, respondents are asked a series of questions regarding both the particular candidate described as well as their general representational preferences. The exact wording of each vignette and follow-up questions are provided below.

> **Control:** John Smith is a local pharmacist running for reelection to the state legislature. Smith's campaign focuses on improving the quality of local infrastructure, specifically on building new bridges and roads. Although he faces a challenger from the opposing party, Smith's campaign is supported by several local political organizations.

> **Influential/tradeoff:** John Smith is a local pharmacist running for reelection to the state legislature. Smith's campaign focuses on improving the quality of local infrastructure, specifically on building new bridges and roads. Other elected officials consider his opinion on issues very important and often follow his lead when deciding how to vote on bills; however, this requires that he spend most of his time in the capitol, which prevents him from spending much time at home with constituents. Although he faces a challenger from the opposing party, Smith's campaign is supported by several local political organizations.

Influential/no tradeoff: John Smith is a local pharmacist running for reelection to the state legislature. Smith's campaign focuses on improving the quality of local infrastructure, specifically on building new bridges and roads. Other elected officials consider his opinion on issues very important and often follow his lead when deciding how to vote on bills. Although he faces a challenger from the opposing party, Smith's campaign is supported by several local political organizations.

Not influential/tradeoff: John Smith is a local pharmacist running for reelection to the state legislature. Smith's campaign focuses on improving the quality of local infrastructure, specifically on building new bridges and roads. As a junior member of the legislature, he does not hold much authority and often follows the opinion of higher-ranking officials when deciding how to vote on bills; however, his lack of political clout allows him to spend more time at home in the district with constituents. Although he faces a challenger from the opposing party, Smith's campaign is supported by several local political organizations.

Not influential/no tradeoff: John Smith is a local pharmacist running for reelection to the state legislature. As a junior member of the legislature he does not hold much authority, and often follows the opinion of higher-ranking officials when deciding how to vote on bills. Smith's campaign focuses on improving the quality of local infrastructure, specifically on building new bridges and roads. Although he faces a challenger from the opposing party, Smith's campaign is supported by several local political organizations.

3.3.2 Measured variables

In the post-election battery, respondents are asked a series of four follow-up questions after receiving treatment assignment. These questions are intended to measure the following variables: (1) vote likelihood on a scale: 1 (least likely) – 100 (most likely), (2) feeling of representational efficacy toward that candidate, measured on a continuous scale: 1 (least likely) – 100 (most likely), (3 & 4) an ordered measure of subjective representational preference for (3) an influential legislator or (4) one who can provide other representational goods. The exact wording of each follow-up question is provided below.

Question 1 text: Based only on the information provided, how likely would you be to vote for John Smith in the upcoming election?

Special instructions: Please use a 0–100 slider with the marker at 50 while the respondent views the question. The labeled points should read: 0 (Very Unlikely) and 100 (Very Likely).

Question 2 text: If John Smith is re-elected, how often do you expect him to represent your interests?

Special instructions: Please use a 0–100 slider with the marker at 50 while the respondent views the question. The labeled points should read: 0 (Never), 15 (Almost never), 30 (Rarely), 40 (Sometimes), 50 (Half of the time), 60 (Usually), 70 (Most of the time), 85 (Almost always), and 100 (Always).

Question 3 text: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: It is more important that my representative hold a high-ranking leadership position than spend time corresponding with constituents.

Special instructions: Please present response options as an ordered 7-point scale in grid form, where 1 corresponds to strongly disagree, 4 corresponds to neutral, and 7 corresponds to strongly agree.

Question 4 text: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: It is more important that a legislator spend time at home in the district than cultivate political relationships in the capitol.

Special instructions: Please present response options as an ordered 7-point scale in grid form, where 1 corresponds to strongly disagree, 4 corresponds to neutral, and 7 corresponds to strongly agree.

3.3.3 Planned Analyses: Sample Comparison & Regression

To analyze the data generated by the vignette and follow-up items, I will first calculate the analysis of variance (ANOVA) with random respondent effects, conduct a t-test to assess differences in means across samples assigned to each condition, and then estimate a multilevel linear regression and ordered logit where applicable. In these analyses, the dependent variable will be constructed using respondents' answers to each of three questions: (1) likelihood of voting for the candidate described, (2) expectation of the candidate's ability to serve as an effective representative, and (3) preference for high-ranking/influential representation.

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Table 1: Possible Values of Conjoint Candidate Traits

	Possible Values
Age	30, 40, 50, 60
Race/ethnicity	Black, White
Gender	Male, Female
College degree	State university, Ivy league, Historically Black university, Community college
Profession	Lawyer, Teacher, Accountant, Medical doctor, Car dealer
Political Party Affiliation	Democrat, Republican, Independent
Influence over other legislators' decisions	Low, Medium, Hugh

*Note: Each trait and the order in which they appear on each profile is randomly varied to ensure equal likelihood