The Persuasion Effects of Political Endorsements

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Abstract

Political endorsements (recommendations about which candidate or policy to support) are ubiquitous in political contexts. They may come from political parties, interest groups, politicians, or even celebrities. Can uninformed citizens identify endorsers who share their interests and use their recommendations as substitutes for detailed political information? This chapter surveys the literature on the persuasion effects of political endorsements. It first provides an overview of theoretical models that examine how political endorsements affect citizens' choices. Then, it describes a seminal observational study of how endorsements affect political persuasion. It next discusses experimental research that assesses the effects of endorsements. It emphasizes that experiments are particularly useful for identifying when political endorsements will persuade citizens because they allow scholars to manipulate the conditions that theoretical models identify in a carefully controlled environment. It concludes by discussing open questions about the effects of political endorsements and describing how my ongoing research addresses them.

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Citizens in representative democracies take on a range of responsibilities, including selecting public officials who make decisions on their behalf and choosing policies via direct democracy. However, if citizens are unable to identify political candidates who share their policy views and ballot propositions that are in line with their interests, it is unlikely that the democratic process will yield outcomes that reflect citizens' preferences. Many political scientists fear just this result, lamenting citizens' lack of information about politics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Indeed, decades of research have shown that citizens are ignorant of the most basic political facts, such as the name of their senator, the proportion of votes Congress needs to override a presidential veto, and the institution responsible for determining whether a law is constitutional. In light of citizens' ignorance about politics, many scholars worry that democratic elections will not be decided by citizens, but rather by political parties, the media, and other elites who will persuade citizens to support their preferred candidates and public policies.

Other scholars are more optimistic about citizens' ability to make informed political decisions and, hence, the state of our representative democracy. They argue that even though citizens are uninformed about basic political facts, they can use information shortcuts, or cues, to guide their political decisions (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Boudreau 2009). These scholars examine the effects of a variety of cues—including party cues (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Arceneaux 2008; Bullock 2011; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014), public opinion polls (Mutz 1992, 1997; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Boudreau and McCubbins 2010), and racial/ethnic cues (McConnaughy et al. 2010; Reeves 1997; Sigelman et

al. 1995; Terkildsen 1993; Jones 2014)—and argue that they can help citizens to make political decisions that reflect their preferences.

One of the most ubiquitous cues available to citizens are political endorsements (i.e., recommendations about which candidate or policy to support). These endorsements may come from political parties, interest groups, media outlets, politicians, or even celebrities. For example, in the 2008 presidential election the well-known actor Chuck Norris urged voters to support his preferred candidate, Mike Huckabee. In 2012, the Democratic Party in California encouraged voters to support a ballot proposition that contained a progressive income tax increase. During the 2016 presidential primary elections, the liberal interest group Democracy for America endorsed Bernie Sanders, the most liberal candidate in the race. Because political endorsements typically come from well-known groups or individuals and because they make a specific recommendation about which alternative to support, they are thought to be particularly persuasive cues. Indeed, if uninformed citizens can identify endorsers who share their interests, they can simply follow their recommendations instead of investing time and energy to learn about the candidates or policy issues on offer. Partly for this reason, political candidates and practitioners actively seek endorsements from well-known individuals and groups and strategically announce them at key moments during their campaigns.

Can uninformed citizens identify endorsers who share their interests and successfully use their recommendations as substitutes for detailed political information? This question has been the subject of much debate in political science. The theoretical literature on this topic uses either spatial or game theoretic models to identify conditions under which uninformed citizens will be persuaded by (and hence base their decisions on) the statements of an endorser. These models show that it is possible for endorsements to persuade citizens and help them make political

decisions that reflect their preferences. The empirical literature on this topic, which includes both observational and experimental studies, tests conditions that the theoretical models identify as necessary for persuasion. These studies show that while endorsements sometimes help citizens to make political decisions that reflect their preferences, they may also lead citizens astray or have no effect on their decisions.

In this chapter, I survey the literature on the persuasion effects of political endorsements. In Section 1, I provide an overview of theoretical models that examine how political endorsements affect citizens' choices. In Section 2, I describe a seminal observational study of how endorsements affect political persuasion. In Section 3, I provide examples from a growing body of experimental research that assess the effects of endorsements. I argue that experiments are particularly useful for identifying when political endorsements will (and will not) persuade citizens because they allow scholars to manipulate the conditions that theoretical models identify under carefully controlled conditions. I conclude by discussing open questions about the effects of political endorsements and new directions for future research on this topic.

1. Theoretical Models of Political Endorsements

Many scholars use either spatial or game theoretic models to identify conditions under which political endorsements will persuade citizens and help them to make decisions that reflect their preferences. Underlying each of these models is the notion that the costs of acquiring political information often outweigh the benefits; thus, citizens typically forego obtaining political information and instead rely on the recommendations of trusted sources like endorsers (Downs 1957). One such model that examines the persuasion effects of political endorsements is Calvert's (1985) model of political advice. In that model, a decision maker (e.g., a voter) has

limited information about which of a variety of alternatives (e.g., candidates) will make him or her better off. To cope with such limited information, the decision maker may acquire advice from another source (e.g., an endorser) about whether particular alternatives are good or bad, but such advice is costly. Further, the source that the decision maker consults may be biased or unbiased, and the advice may be right or wrong. While the decision maker does not know which alternative a particular source will recommend, he or she does know the bias (or lack thereof) of a source. The main result of the model is that a biased source is more valuable to the decision maker than an unbiased source because the biased source is more likely to provide information that will change the decision maker's mind. The intuition for this result is that a biased source who recommends the alternative that he or she was supposed to have been biased against can prevent the decision maker from making a large error. An unbiased source, in contrast, may not cause the decision maker to change his or her mind, thereby making it irrational to pay the cost of acquiring advice from this source. In this way, Calvert's (1985) model identifies an important condition under which information sources like political endorsements will induce persuasion: when the endorser is biased toward one of the alternatives and, importantly, voters know the direction of such bias.

A related spatial model of the persuasion effects of political endorsements is that of McKelvey and Ordeshook (1985, 1986). In their model, uninformed voters can use information shortcuts like public opinion polls and endorsements to choose the candidate they would have chosen if they had complete information about the candidates' ideological positions. In contrast to many spatial models, McKelvey and Ordeshook do not assume that voters must know the candidates' ideological positions in order to vote correctly (i.e., choose the candidate whose ideological position is closest to their own). Rather, they show that voting correctly requires

only that voters know which candidate is to the left or right of the other, the midpoint between

the candidates' ideological positions, and on which side of the midpoint their ideal candidate lies.

In their model, information shortcuts like polls and endorsements enable voters to estimate the

left-right orientation of the candidates, as well as the midpoint between them. Armed with an

estimate of the midpoint between the candidates, an assessment of their own position relative to

the electorate, and beliefs about which candidate is to the left or right of the other, voters can

infer which candidate is closest to their ideal point. Thus, in McKelvey and Ordeshook's model,

a necessary condition for persuasion is that voters are able to use political information like

endorsements to estimate the left-right positions of the candidates. For example, if the National

Rifle Association endorses Candidate X, then voters correctly infer that Candidate X is to the

right of Candidate Y.

Building upon the insights of Calvert (1985) and McKelvey and Ordeshook (1985, 1986),

Grofman and Norrander (1990) develop a spatial model of how endorsements from reference

groups enable voters to choose the candidate whose ideological position is closest to their own.

Like McKelvey and Ordeshook, Grofman and Norrander assume that voters know the left-right

orientation of the candidates (but not the candidates' exact ideological positions) and the

ideological locations of reference groups like endorsers. Unlike McKelvey and Ordeshook,

Grofman and Norrander incorporate two endorsers who make recommendations about whether a

voter should prefer candidate A or candidate B.

Grofman and Norrander's (1990) model identifies several conditions under which

endorsements will persuade voters to choose the optimal candidate (i.e., the candidate whose

ideological position is closest to their own). First, if the two endorsers are located on either side

of a voter on a left-right ideological dimension and both endorsers recommend the same

candidate, then following the endorsers' recommendation will enable the voter to choose the optimal candidate. Thus, when these conditions are met, the voter should always base his or her decision on the endorsers' recommendation. Second, if the two endorsers are located on the same side of the voter, then following the recommendation of the endorser who is closest to the voter's own position will allow the voter to make an optimal choice. Thus, the voter should only base his or her decision on the recommendation of the endorser who is closest to his or her own position. Third, if the left-right orientation of the candidates is not known to the voter or if the endorsers only recommend candidates that are close to their own ideological positions (otherwise they do not issue an endorsement), then the voter can also benefit from choosing the opposite of what the more distant endorser recommends.

In contrast to McKelvey and Ordeshook's (1985, 1986) and Grofman and Norrander's (1990) focus on when political endorsements help voters to choose the optimal candidate, Lupia (1992) models the effects of endorsements in direct democracy contexts. Unlike candidate elections, direct democracy elections present voters with a choice between a new policy outcome and the status quo. Thus, in Lupia's model, a completely informed agenda-setter (analogous to a sponsor of a ballot proposition) has an opportunity to propose a policy alternative to the status quo. If the agenda-setter chooses to propose a policy alternative, then voters must choose between the status quo (about which they are assumed to have complete information) and the agenda-setter's proposed alternative (about which they are assumed to have incomplete information). Before choosing between these two alternatives, voters receive an endorsement that provides credible information about the location of the agenda-setter's proposed alternative. Specifically, the credible endorser informs voters that the agenda-setter's proposed alternative is either to the left of the status quo, the right of the status quo, or the same as the status quo. After

receiving this information, voters update their beliefs about the location of the agenda-setter's proposed policy. This helps them to make more accurate inferences about whether the agenda-setter's policy or the status quo will make them better off. In this way, Lupia demonstrates that a credible endorser can help uninformed voters in direct democracy contexts to make decisions that are similar to those they would make if they were fully informed.

Taken together, the spatial models described above identify conditions under which uninformed voters should be persuaded by an endorser's recommendations and make informed decisions as a result. A key assumption in each of these models, however, is that the endorser is credible; that is, the endorser has knowledge about the candidates' true positions or the value of a policy alternative and truthfully reveals this information to voters (albeit with bias in the Calvert [1985] model). Needless to say, this assumption does not hold in many real-world electoral contexts, where endorsers may not be credible or may act strategically by endorsing more distant candidates or policies for non-ideological reasons (such as viability or quality). In such circumstances, are there conditions under which voters can nonetheless learn from the statements of an endorser and make informed decisions?

Lupia and McCubbins (1998) develop a game-theoretic model to address this question. In their model, there are two players: an endorser and a voter (dubbed "the speaker" and "the principal," respectively, in their model). The voter must choose between two alternatives (x and y), but before making a choice, the voter receives a recommendation from the endorser about whether to choose x or y. In the model, there are three types of uncertainty: 1) whether x is better or worse than y for the voter, 2) whether the endorser has knowledge about whether x is better or worse than y for the voter, and 3) whether the endorser has common or conflicting interests with the voter (i.e., whether the endorser benefits when the voter makes a utility-

maximizing choice [common interests] or benefits when the voter does *not* make a utility

maximizing choice [conflicting interests]). These types of uncertainty are modeled as three

probabilistic moves by Nature. After these moves by Nature, the endorser sends a signal to the

voter about whether x is better or worse than y. Importantly, the endorser need not tell the truth

when choosing which signal to send. After receiving the endorser's signal, the voter chooses x

or y.

The results of Lupia and McCubbins's (1998) model show that if the voter believes that

there is a sufficiently high probability that the endorser is knowledgeable and shares common

interests with him or her, then in equilibrium, the voter bases his or her decision on the

endorser's signal and persuasion occurs. Otherwise, the voter ignores the endorser and

persuasion does not occur. Lupia and McCubbins also extend this basic model by incorporating

institutions, such as the threat of verification and penalties for lying, that are common in political

settings. They show that sufficiently high probabilities of verification and large penalties for

lying induce an endorser whose interests conflict with those of the voter to send truthful signals

and the voter to, therefore, be persuaded by the endorser's signals. In this way, Lupia and

McCubbins identify conditions under which persuasion can occur even in contexts where

endorsers are not necessarily credible. They also demonstrate the conditions under which

institutions can substitute for an endorser sharing common interests with voters and induce

persuasion.

2. Empirical Studies of the Persuasion Effects of Political Endorsements

The theoretical models described above identify conditions under which political

endorsements should persuade voters and help them make political decisions that reflect their

preferences. But do endorsements actually have these effects in real-world electoral contexts? A number of empirical studies in political science address this question (e.g., Lupia 1994; Ladd and Lenz 2009; McDermott 2006; Kousser et al. 2015). These studies take advantage of unique electoral contexts that satisfy particular conditions that the theoretical models identify as necessary for persuasion. They then examine whether endorsements have the predicted effects on voters in these contexts.

A seminal study of the persuasion effects of political endorsements is that of Lupia (1994). In that study, Lupia assesses whether voters are able to use their perceptions of an endorser's reputation for supporting certain types of policies to help them make informed political decisions. The theoretical models described above indicate that voters should be able to do so, but they assume that voters correctly perceive an endorser's preferences. To investigate whether voters can in fact correctly perceive an endorser's preferences and use such perceptions to make informed decisions, Lupia conducts an exit poll survey during the 1988 general election in California. In that election, voters were asked to make decisions about five complex ballot propositions that sought to reform auto insurance regulations in the state.

The electoral context that Lupia (1994) examines is well suited for testing theories of political endorsements for several reasons. First, it requires voters to make decisions about complex issues about which they likely lack detailed or "encyclopedic" information; thus, voters may need to rely on information shortcuts like endorsements. Second, because nearly all voters in the study are consumers of auto insurance, it is possible to identify their optimal choices on each ballot proposition (i.e., choices in favor of lower premiums or higher expected values of compensation if a car accident occurs). Third, this election featured endorsements from three

prominent groups (the insurance industry, trial lawyers, and consumer groups) that were widely disseminated during a hard fought campaign.

The results of Lupia's (1994) study show that uninformed voters who know the preferences of an endorser are able to make decisions that are comparable to those of more informed voters (i.e., those who possess "encyclopedic" knowledge). Specifically, voters who know that the insurance industry, whose interests conflict with their own, sponsored particular propositions are able to use this knowledge to oppose those propositions. In this way, Lupia's study provides empirical support for two key aspects of theoretical models of political endorsements. First, it shows that uninformed voters can correctly perceive an endorser's reputation for supporting certain types of policies and then use this perception to help them make informed political decisions. Second, it demonstrates that voters can benefit from choosing the opposite of what an endorser with different preferences from their own recommends (as Grofman and Norrander [1990] suggest).

Although Lupia's (1994) study tests an important aspect of theoretical models of political endorsements, there are other conditions that remain to be tested. For example, Lupia assumes that the endorsers in his study are knowledgeable and focuses on their trustworthiness and reputations for supporting certain types of policies. While the assumption of knowledgeable endorsers makes sense in that context (the endorsers did, after all, draft the ballot propositions at issue), it may not hold for other endorsers in other electoral contexts. Further, because of the hard fought campaign and the millions of dollars the endorsers spent to influence voters, the endorsements in that election were particularly salient cues. In other contexts, this may not be the case, and other salient pieces of information may compete with the endorsements. Additionally, although Lupia demonstrates that particular endorsers had an incentive to mislead

voters (e.g., the insurance industry used titles that sounded consumer friendly, such as "No Fault Automobile Insurance" for ballot propositions that it sponsored) and that voters were able to recognize this conflict of interest, it is unclear whether there are conditions under which an untrustworthy endorser will nonetheless tell the truth in real-world settings. As I discuss in the next section, a growing body of experimental studies of political endorsements sheds light on these important questions.

3.   Experimental Tests of the Persuasion Effects of Political Endorsements

Experimental studies of political endorsements further clarify the conditions under which endorsements help uninformed citizens to make political decisions that reflect their preferences. Unlike observational studies of political endorsements, experiments allow scholars to 1) systematically manipulate conditions that theoretical models identify as necessary for persuasion, 2) randomly assign subjects to those different conditions, and 3) directly observe the choices that subjects make under these different conditions. Because experiments allow scholars to observe subjects' decisions under carefully controlled conditions, they are particularly useful for identifying whether and when political endorsements help subjects to make informed decisions. To illustrate how and why experiments are well-suited for this purpose, I discuss several examples of experiments that manipulate political endorsements below. Taken together, these experiments shed additional light on the conditions under which citizens can use political endorsements to make informed decisions.

One example of an experimental study of the persuasion effects of political endorsements is Lupia and McCubbins (1998). In their study, Lupia and McCubbins use laboratory experiments to test their model of political endorsements and examine the conditions under

which endorsements help citizens to make informed decisions. In the experiments, subjects guess the outcomes of unseen coin tosses. This is analogous to the voter in their model choosing between two alternatives, x and y, and being uncertain about which choice is better or worse. As in the model, another subject (acting as the endorser) observes each coin toss outcome and then makes a statement about whether the coin landed on heads or tails before subjects make their predictions. Importantly, subjects know that the endorser is under no obligation to communicate the outcome of the coin toss truthfully. After receiving the endorser's statement, subjects make their prediction about each coin toss outcome and earn money for each correct prediction.

In accordance with their theoretical model, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) systematically manipulate whether subjects receive statements from an endorser who shares common interests with them or whose interests conflict with their own. They also manipulate whether the endorser with conflicting interests is subject to a penalty for lying or a threat of verification. Lupia and McCubbins vary the presence of common versus conflicting interests, as well as the size of the penalty for lying, by manipulating the financial incentives of the endorser. They also manipulate whether the endorser observes the coin toss outcome and, therefore, whether he or she is knowledgeable about the best choice for subjects.

The results of Lupia and McCubbins's (1998) experiments show that an endorser's statements persuade voters and help them make informed decisions under the conditions their model identifies. Specifically, their experimental results show that when the endorser shares common interests with subjects, subjects are persuaded by his or her statements and make correct predictions at a rate that is substantially greater than chance. Similarly, when a sufficiently large penalty for lying or threat of verification is imposed upon an endorser whose interests conflict with those of subjects, subjects are persuaded by the endorser's statements at a rate that is similar

to when the endorser shares common interests with them. When the endorser lacks knowledge about the coin toss outcome, however, subjects ignore his or her statements. In this way, Lupia and McCubbins's experimental results identify conditions under which uninformed citizens can be persuaded by an endorser's statements and make informed decisions. Indeed, subjects in their experiments lack knowledge about the coin toss outcome, but even without this knowledge, they are able to learn from a trustworthy endorser's statements and make better decisions than they would have made on their own (i.e., by guessing randomly).

Despite the many conditions for persuasion that Lupia and McCubbins (1998) analyze, two that they do not examine are whether the persuasiveness of a trustworthy endorser's statements varies depending upon citizens' level of sophistication and whether a competing source of information is provided. Lupia and McCubbins do not examine the former condition because subjects in their experiments cannot be more or less sophisticated at their experimental task (i.e., predicting coin tosses, where all subjects know that there is a 50% chance that a fair coin will land on heads). These scholars do not examine the latter condition because their experiments expose subjects to only one piece of information (the statements of an endorser). In real-world electoral settings, however, citizens vary in their level of sophistication and are exposed to multiple, potentially conflicting sources of information.

In order to analyze whether the persuasiveness of a trustworthy endorser's statements depends upon citizens' level of sophistication and whether a conflicting source of information is provided, Boudreau (2009, 2013) replicates Lupia and McCubbins's (1998) experiments. However, instead of having subjects predict the outcomes of unseen coin tosses, Boudreau asks them to answer math problems. One advantage of having subjects make decisions about math problems is that subjects vary in their level of sophistication at performing this task. A second

advantage is that there exists a valid, reliable, and agreed upon measure of subjects' level of sophistication at performing this task—namely, SAT math scores. A third advantage is that although there are objectively correct answers to math problems (and, hence, it is clear which choice makes subjects better off), people can have different beliefs about the correct answer. This enables Boudreau to provide subjects with a second, conflicting source of information— namely, poll results generated by surveying others about what they thought the answers to the math problems were.

The results of Boudreau's (2009, 2013) experiments show how subjects' level of sophistication and the presence of a conflicting source of information condition the persuasiveness of an endorser's statements. Specifically, when the endorser shares common interests with subjects, is subject to a sufficiently large penalty for lying, or faces a sufficiently high probability of verification, both sophisticated and unsophisticated subjects are persuaded by the endorser's statements and achieve large improvements in their decisions (relative to sophisticated and unsophisticated subjects in the control group, who solve the problems on their own). And, the even larger improvements that unsophisticated subjects achieve help close the gap between them and the sophisticated subjects (Boudreau 2009). However, the gap between sophisticated and unsophisticated subjects does not close when a conflicting source of information is provided together with an endorser's statements. That is, when subjects receive a trustworthy endorser's correct statement about the answer to the problem along with poll results that suggest the incorrect answer, unsophisticated subjects mistakenly follow the poll results and make worse decisions as a result (Boudreau 2013).

One of the strengths of Boudreau's (2009, 2013) and Lupia and McCubbins's (1998) experiments is that subjects make decisions for which there are objectively correct or incorrect

choices under different conditions. This approach is advantageous because it allows them to measure precisely whether and when an endorser's statements persuade subjects and help them to make a greater number of correct decisions than they would have made on their own. However, under what conditions do endorsements improve citizen decision making in real-world electoral contexts? What happens to the quality of citizens' decisions when the information environment is more complex, as it inevitably is during the course of real-world campaigns? Can citizens correctly perceive whether an endorser shares common interests with them during such campaigns?

McDermott (2006) addresses these questions by conducting a survey experiment in which the endorsement of an actual group (namely, the AFL-CIO labor union) is manipulated. Specifically, respondents read biographical information about two hypothetical candidates (one Democrat and one Republican) running against each other for a seat in the House of Representatives. Respondents in the control group receive only this information, while respondents in the two treatment groups are also told either that the Democratic candidate received an endorsement from the AFL-CIO or that the Republican candidate received this endorsement. Drawing upon the logic of the theoretical models described above, McDermott hypothesizes that respondents will use the AFL-CIO's endorsement as an ideological signal (i.e., that the endorsed candidate is more liberal than other candidates of the same party) that will help them choose likeminded candidates. The logic behind this prediction stems from research showing that people tend to associate labor unions with liberal policy views and/or the Democratic Party (see Miller, Wlezien, and Hildreth 1991; Zinni, Rohdebeck, and Mattei 1997).

The results of McDermott's (2006) study identify conditions under which the AFL-CIO's endorsement helps respondents to choose candidates who share their policy views. In the

treatment group where the Democratic candidate receives the AFL-CIO's endorsement, liberal respondents are more likely to support the Democratic candidate than are liberal respondents in the control group (where the Democratic candidate is unendorsed). Conservative respondents, on the other hand, are less likely to support the Democratic candidate when he receives the AFL-CIO's endorsement than are conservative respondents in the control group. In this way, the AFL-CIO's endorsement of the Democratic candidate helps both liberal and conservative voters to choose candidates whose policy views are more similar to their own. The AFL-CIO's endorsement of the Republican candidate, however, has no effect on respondents' propensity to support that candidate. This null finding makes sense, given that a labor union's endorsement of a Republican candidate provides respondents with conflicting signals about the candidate's ideological position.

One of the strengths of McDermott's (2006) study is that it provides respondents with an actual group's endorsement, as opposed to the recommendations of a generic endorser (e.g., "the speaker") that Lupia and McCubbins (1998)[1] and Boudreau (2009, 2013) provide in their experiments. It also uses an experimental task (namely, choosing between two hypothetical candidates for the House of Representatives) that is higher in mundane realism than coin tosses or math problems. Stated differently, the experimental task in McDermott's study is, on its face, more similar to real-world political decisions (see Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer 1998). Despite these advantages, there are two important drawbacks of McDermott's study. First, despite the higher mundane realism of the experimental task, the treatment that assigns the AFL-CIO's endorsement to the Republican candidate is somewhat unrealistic. This is an alternative

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[1] In experiments not discussed here, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) manipulate actual speakers—namely, Phil Donahue and Rush Limbaugh.

explanation for the null results she observes for this treatment. Second, while McDermott draws upon research that shows that people tend to associate labor unions with liberal policy views and/or the Democratic Party, she cannot tell whether respondents in her study hold these beliefs. The reason for this is that she does not have an individual-level measure of respondents' beliefs about the ideological position of the AFL-CIO, nor does she provide them with contextual information that conveys that the AFL-CIO is a liberal group.

To overcome these drawbacks, Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009) conduct field experiments in which participants are randomly assigned to receive an interest group's endorsement during actual elections. Specifically, Arceneaux and Kolodny study two competitive elections for the state assembly in Pennsylvania. In these elections, a well-known liberal interest group endorsed the Democratic candidates and allowed these scholars to randomly assign whether participants were contacted by the group or not. Participants who were contacted (i.e., the treatment group) were informed of the interest group's endorsement of a particular candidate and were also given a reason for the group's endorsement (namely, that the candidate supports reproductive health care rights). The interest group provided such contextual information along with its endorsement to help uninformed participants understand its reputation for supporting certain types of policies.

In this way, Arceneaux and Kolodny's (2009) study is similar to the one that Lupia (1994) conducted because they, too, examine whether uninformed voters can use knowledge of an endorser's reputation for supporting certain types of policies to help them make informed decisions. In contrast to Lupia, Arceneaux and Kolodny are able to randomly assign participants to receive information about the interest group's endorsement and reputation for supporting certain types of policies, as opposed to simply observing voters who naturally know or do not know such information. This enables Arceneaux and Kolodny to avoid assuming that

participants who know an endorser's position are no different from those who do not know the endorser's position (in terms of political knowledge or other observable or unobservable characteristics). Further, random assignment of the endorser's position enables Arceneaux and Kolodny to estimate the causal effect of the endorsement on participants who are informed versus uninformed about politics. Like Lupia and McCubbins (1998) and Boudreau (2009, 2013), these scholars take advantage of the strong internal validity that experiments provide. However, because Arceneaux and Kolodny conduct their experiments in the field (as opposed to in the laboratory), they are able to use an experimental treatment that is more similar to real-world political contexts.

The results of Arceneaux and Kolodny's (2009) study show that political endorsements can provide a powerful negative cue to voters. Specifically, they find that Republican participants who receive the liberal interest group's endorsement are significantly less likely to support the Democratic candidates than are Republican participants in the control group. This effect is most pronounced among politically unaware Republicans, who use the information about the group's endorsement and its reputation for supporting certain types of policies to help them choose candidates who share their partisanship. In contrast, Arceneaux and Kolodny find that the endorsements have limited effects on politically aware Republicans, who likely already know that they should oppose the Democratic candidates. Their results also show that the group's endorsement has minimal effects on Democratic participants, regardless of their level of political awareness. The reason for this is that support for the Democratic candidates among Democratic participants in the control group is already quite high (78%), so there is not much room for the endorsement to boost support further. Taken together, Arceneaux and Kolodny's results provide additional support for the idea that endorsements can provide voters with

negative cues, much as Grofman and Norrander (1990) suggest. They also indicate that the group's endorsement in this context may have backfired, as it reduced support among members of the out-party while failing to boost support among co-partisans.

In contrast to McDermott's (2006) and Arceneaux and Kolodny's (2009) focus on political endorsements in candidate elections, other scholars use experiments to examine the effects of endorsements in direct democracy contexts (e.g., Nicholson 2011; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Burnett and Parry 2014). For example, Boudreau and MacKenzie's (2014) survey experiments assess how political party endorsements affect citizens' decisions about ballot propositions at issue in California. These scholars examine political party endorsements, in part, because political parties have well known reputations for supporting certain types of policies (i.e., the Democratic Party typically supports liberal policies, while the Republican Party typically supports conservative policies; Sniderman and Bullock 2004; Levendusky 2009; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012). Thus, a key condition that theoretical models identify as necessary for persuasion is met. Consequently, Boudreau and MacKenzie find that respondents are persuaded by their own political party's endorsement of particular ballot propositions. That is, respondents are more likely to support propositions that their own party supports and oppose propositions that their own party opposes when they receive political party endorsements. However, these experiments also identify an important condition under which political party endorsements are less persuasive—namely, when policy information that conflicts with their own party's endorsement is also provided. Indeed, respondents shift their opinions away from their own party's position when policy information provides a compelling reason for doing so.

4.   Conclusion: New Directions for Research on Political Endorsements

The theoretical and empirical research described above identifies conditions under which political endorsements can persuade voters and help them make informed decisions. Specifically, spatial and game-theoretic models indicate that when voters have basic information about an endorser (e.g., its location on a left-right ideological dimension, its reputation for supporting certain types of policies, its level of knowledge and trustworthiness), they can use its recommendation as a substitute for detailed information about the choice that they must make. Empirical tests, by and large, provide support for these models' predictions and illustrate the conditions under which political endorsements can persuade voters and help them with their decisions. As I argued above, experiments are particularly well suited to testing theoretical models of political endorsements because they allow scholars to manipulate conditions that the theories identify as necessary and/or sufficient for persuasion under carefully controlled conditions.

Although the empirical tests described above answer many important questions about the persuasion effects of political endorsements, there are other aspects of theoretical models of political endorsements that remain to be tested. These tests are important new directions for future research on this topic. First, spatial models of political endorsements often assume that voters know the left-right orientation of the candidates from which they must choose (e.g., McKelvey and Ordeshook 1985, 1986; Grofman and Norrander 1990). While this assumption is uncontroversial in national elections (e.g., voters likely know that the Democratic candidate is to the left of the Republican candidate), it is not clear whether this assumption holds in electoral contexts where party labels are absent (e.g., nonpartisan local elections) or uninformative (e.g., partisan primaries). Second, spatial models assume that voters use a credible endorser's

recommendation as a tool to help them identify the candidates' ideological positions and choose the candidate whose position is closest to their own. In real-world electoral contexts, however, voters may use the endorsements of credible groups differently. For example, instead of using a political party's endorsement as an ideological signal of which candidate is to the left or right of the other, voters may treat it as a team-based signal that tells them which candidate to support (irrespective of the candidate's ideological position). Voters may also treat a political party's endorsement as a team-based signal, but use endorsements from other groups (such as newspapers with ideological reputations) as ideological signals. Third, spatial models assume that voters know their own ideological positions. While this assumption may hold in national political contexts, it is questionable whether it holds in state and local contexts.

While much work remains to be done on these topics, my research on the effects of political endorsements in local elections begins to test these assumptions empirically (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015a, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b). Like the empirical research described above, we use observational and experimental methods to assess whether and when political endorsements help voters to identify candidates whose policy views are similar to their own. Unlike many previous studies, however, we are able to test the spatial model of voting directly and assess how different types of endorsements affect voters' ability to choose candidates whose policy views are similar to their own (i.e., spatial voting). The reason for this is that, in the local context we examine, we are able to measure candidates' and voters' ideological positions on the same scale.

Specifically, we conduct original surveys that ask candidates in mayoral and city council elections in San Francisco to take positions on prominent local policy issues during the campaigns. We ask voters to report their positions on these same policy issues, as well as which

candidates they voted for, on a written exit poll. We use these policy positions to construct comparable measures of candidate and voter ideology (ideal points) and examine how ideology affects voters' choices. We also experimentally manipulate different types of endorsements—namely, endorsements from political parties, prominent public officials, racial/ethnic groups, and newspapers with local ideological reputations—and examine their effects on voters' propensity to choose ideologically-similar candidates.

The results of these studies shed light on the assumptions described above and the persuasive effects of political endorsements more generally. With respect to the assumption that voters know the left-right orientation of the candidates from which they must choose, our results suggest that this assumption can hold even for voters in a low-information local election like the one we examine. Indeed, we observe a strong, positive relationship between voter ideology and the ideology of the candidates they choose in the mayoral election that we study, even among voters with low levels of knowledge about local politics (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015a). This suggests that voters can perceive the left-right orientation of the candidates. However, whether this assumption holds appears to depend on whether the election is for a high-profile citywide office like mayor or a low-profile district office like city council. For example, in the city council election that we examine, we observe virtually no relationship between voter and candidate ideology among low-knowledge voters in our control group, where political endorsements are not provided (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015b). This indicates that the assumption that voters can perceive the left-right orientation of candidates may be less tenable in some low-information contexts.

With respect to the assumption that voters use endorsements as a tool to help them choose the candidate whose ideological position is closest to their own, our results suggest that

voters may use endorsements in other ways. Rather than using political party, newspaper, and racial/ethnic group endorsements as ideological signals of the candidates' relative positions, voters in the mayoral election appear to use these endorsements as non-ideological signals of candidate quality or viability. For example, when Democratic voters are told that a candidate received the Democratic Party's endorsement, they are significantly more likely to choose that candidate, even if that candidate's policy views are somewhat at odds with their own (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015a). Similarly, when voters are told that a candidate received an endorsement from their racial/ethnic group, they appear to treat that information as an identity-based signal of which candidate to support (i.e., they support candidates endorsed by co-ethnic groups and oppose those endorsed by other racial/ethnic groups) (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2018a). In both cases, the result is a weakening of the relationship between voters' policy views and those of the candidates they choose. Somewhat surprisingly, voters even appear to treat endorsements from newspapers with local ideological reputations as non-ideological signals of candidate quality or viability (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015a).

That said, the weakening of the relationship between voters' and candidates' policy views appears to depend on the context in which the endorsements are given. When voters initially lack information about the spatial locations of candidates (as is the case in the city council election we study), they appear to treat political party endorsements as ideological signals that help them to choose candidates whose policy views are similar to their own (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015b, 2018b). We observe similar effects for endorsements from prominent public officials with well-known ideological reputations (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015b). Indeed, our results indicate that both types of endorsements are effective

substitutes for the detailed information about the candidates' policy positions contained in a nonpartisan voter guide. In this way, our results indicate that the amount of spatial information that voters initially have about candidates may condition the effects of political endorsements. When voters know a great deal about the spatial locations of candidates (as is true of voters in the mayoral election and knowledgeable voters in the city council election), the endorsements appear to introduce other, non-ideological considerations in the minds of voters. When voters lack this spatial information, however, the endorsements appear to function as ideological signals. Indeed, we observe the strongest ideological effects of endorsements among politically unknowledgeable voters in the city council election (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015b, 2018b).

With respect to the assumption that voters know their own ideological positions, our research suggests that this is a tenuous assumption in the local context we examine. Some voters who self-identify as "progressive" or "liberal" actually hold quite moderate or even conservative policy views on local issues. While concerns about voters' ability to place themselves accurately on a left-right ideological dimension are particularly acute in low-information local contexts like the one we examine, there is also reason to question whether they can do so in other nonpartisan contexts such as primaries, or even state and national elections. If voters are unable to place themselves accurately on a left-right ideological dimension, then this is yet another barrier to spatial voting. Indeed, in order to choose the candidate whose ideological position is closest to their own, voters must know something about their own ideological position (as spatial models assume). Thus, we extend our research by conducting experiments in which after voters express their views on local policy issues, they are shown a spatial map of their own ideological position relative to the ideological positions of the two candidates. Our results indicate that such spatial

maps help voters to choose candidates whose policy views are more similar to their own, relative to voters in a control group who do not receive spatial maps (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2018b).

Taken together, the research described above sheds additional light on the conditions under which political endorsements persuade voters. Despite the many contributions of theoretical, observational, and experimental research on this topic, there remain other questions for future research to explore. Chief among them are how the lack of an endorsement from a group affects persuasion and whether voters can accurately place endorsers on a left-right ideological dimension. With respect to the first question, Grofman and Norrander's (1990) model demonstrates that the absence of an endorsement can be informative, but empirical tests of this aspect of the model are lacking. Further, existing research does not address whether voters are capable of identifying the spatial locations of particular endorsers. It also does not measure the extent to which voters perceive particular endorsers as knowledgeable and/or trustworthy. These are fruitful questions for future research. It is also an open question as to whether voters will use endorsements when substantive information about the candidates' policy positions (such as that contained in a voter guide) is also provided. Scholars can shed light on these questions by conducting experiments that manipulate these additional conditions in carefully controlled settings.

Of course, the conditions under which political endorsements persuade voters are not only of interest to scholars, but also to political practitioners who seek to influence voters. The research surveyed above also suggests important lessons about the effects that political endorsements might have if they were provided on real-world ballots, ballot pamphlets, or voter education websites and mailings. For example, if practitioners wish to facilitate spatial voting,

the research described above indicates that the solution many reformers advocate—providing voters with information like endorsements—may be insufficient in particular contexts. Also, some endorsements (be they racial/ethnic group endorsements, political party endorsements, or a labor union's endorsement) can do more harm than good if they alienate certain segments of the electorate without shoring up support among core members. Further, other types of information (such as policy information and public opinion polls) can compete with endorsements, rendering them less persuasive than they otherwise would be. In this way, continued research on the effects of political endorsements will not only contribute to scholarly debates, but also real-world political practices.

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