The Cost of Electoral Confidence

Joseph Loffredo, Alejandro Flores, and Charles Stewart III

MIT Election Data + Science Lab

June 2023
Election administrators must make budgetary tradeoffs (Mohr et al. 2018, Stewart 2022):

- administrative costs of maintaining infrastructure, planning for the future
- costs of conducting each election

Can the "price-quality" heuristic apply to the conducting of elections?

- Consumers perceive higher priced products as higher in quality, even after direct experiences with products
  
  ▶ Rao and Monroe 1989; Hsee 1996; Compeau and Grewal 1998; Shiv et al. 2005; Plassmann et al. 2008; Gneezy et al. 2014; Cheslock and Riggs 2021
Voter are misinformed about how we fund elections
Evaluating Local Government Spending

- General Elections: 48% Too high, 44% About right, 8% Too low
- Libraries: 27% Too high, 49% About right, 24% Too low
- Public Parking Facilities: 36% Too high, 51% About right, 13% Too low
- Parks & Recreation Departments: 21% Too high, 59% About right, 20% Too low
- Police Departments: 27% Too high, 42% About right, 31% Too low
- Schools: 25% Too high, 39% About right, 36% Too low

Evaluation categories: Too low, About right, Too high
Does \( \uparrow \) funding \( \rightarrow \uparrow \) confidence?

Loffredo, Flores, and Stewart

The Cost of Electoral Confidence

June 2023

![Bar Chart Showing the Distribution of Opinions on Funding and Confidence]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party ID</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experimental Findings

(1) Changing the framing of current spending levels have no effects on voter confidence

A recent report issued by researchers at MIT indicated that the cost of administering a presidential election nationwide is about [$5 billion / $30 per voter].

Please indicate how confident you are that this level of spending makes elections [more accurate / more convenient / more secure].

(2) Changing the framing and magnitude of proposed funding increases does not increase public support

Suppose lawmakers were considering a proposal to increase election spending by [5% / 40%], going from the present [raw $ amount change (ex. $5 billion to $5.25 billion)].

If this proposal is approved, how elections are run in this country will... Worsen a lot → Improve a lot (scaled 0-1).
Main conclusions:

1. Voters believe we spend too much to conduct elections
2. There is a partisan divide in relative priorities of how election administrators can improve elections
3. Mixed evidence for the relevance of the "price-quality" heuristic in global evaluations of election administration
   - Evidence of partisan variation
   - Translates into voter evaluations of the accuracy, security, and convenience of state elections
Thank You!

Please reach out with any questions/comments.

Joe Loffredo (loffredo@mit.edu)
Alex Flores (aflores410@mit.edu)
Charles Stewart III (cstewart@mit.edu)
Sample:
- Survey fielded by YouGov (February 27 - March 3, 2023)
- $n = 2,000$

Survey design:
- Descriptive questions:
  - Evaluating, comparing spending levels; ranking election administration priorities
- Experimental treatments:
  - $1 \times 2$ design: framing current spending levels
  - $2 \times 2$ design: support for spending proposals by framing and size of proposed increase
Evaluating Local Government Spending (by Party)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending Category</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Elections</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Parking Facilities</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks &amp; Recreation Departments</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Departments</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spending Category</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Elections</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Parking Facilities</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks &amp; Recreation Departments</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Departments</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evaluation: Too low, About right, Too high.
Comparing States

Which state is likely to have more elections?

- Convenient
- Secure
- Accurate

% Respondents

- State A ($10 per voter)
- State B ($2 per voter)
- Both states about even
A recent report issued by researchers at MIT indicated that the cost of administering a presidential election nationwide is about \([\$5 \text{ billion} / \$30 \text{ per voter}]\)

Please indicate how confident you are that this level of spending makes elections...
Supporting New Spending Proposals

Suppose lawmakers were considering a proposal to increase election spending by \([5\%/40\%]\), going from the present \([\text{Egotropopic / Sociotropic } \Delta]\).

If this proposal is approved, how elections are run in this country will... **Worsen a lot → Improve a lot** (scaled 0-1).
Experiment 2

Would you support this proposal to increase the amount of money spent on running elections by [5% / 40%]?