

Political contenders and representatives wait to present nominating petitions to the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners on Monday. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

# Primary advantage

Yes, it helps to be first on the ballot. What can we do about it?

Seeing the news coverage of Monday morning's ritual — nearly 170 political candidates with their nominating petitions lining up outside the Chicago Board of Elections office in the



**Eric Zorn**

Loop, the first candidate having arrived at 10 a.m. Sunday — two questions come to mind. Is it really worth it? Is there a better way? The answer to the first question is a qualified and somewhat surprising yes. Every candidate who's standing in line (or has a representative standing in line) with petitions in hand (or on a dolly) at 9 a.m. when the doors open for business on the first day of the eight-day filing period at the Board of Elections is entered into a lottery that determines the order that candidates' names will

appear on the ballot.

Show up much earlier than 9 a.m. and you're grandstanding — wasting your time hoping some reporter will interview you and voters will see the story, and consider your willingness to make meaningless gestures a plus.

Why not? Voters are simple folk, after all.

The idea that voters are influenced by the order in which candidates' names appear on the ballot sounds like a superstition, an old spouses' tale. As if any voter, having made the effort to get to the polls or obtain an absentee ballot, would make a mockery of the process by impulsively choosing the first name on the ballot.

But, as it turns out, numerous academic studies going back to at least the 1920s on what's called "ballot order effects" have found that a small but sometimes significant number of voters do exactly that.

"The first listed candidate wins about 1 in 10 elections that he or she would lose without the bene-

fit of order," concludes a recent research paper by Yuval Salant, a professor of managerial economics and decision sciences at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, and political scientist Marc Meredith of the University of Pennsylvania. "Being listed first on the ballot increases a candidate's likelihood of winning office by about 5 percentage points. Being listed in the median ballot position, on the other hand, reduces the likelihood of winning office by 2.5 percentage points."

Where did they come up with this? By studying the results of 7,851 city council, community college and school district elections in California from 1995 to 2008. They chose California because there, all candidates, not just the early birds, are entered into ballot position lotteries. So if position didn't matter you wouldn't see any pattern, let alone the striking result that emerged in Salant and Meredith's research.

In races with two to four candidates, they found being listed first

increased a candidate's percentage share of the vote by 1 to 2 percentage points. In races with five to nine candidates, being first conferred an advantage of up to 4 percentage points.

Why? One theory has it that some voters simply settle on the first candidate who strikes them as "good enough." Another is that we're psychologically wired to give more weight to the first option we're presented with — opinion pollsters know this and so usually rotate or randomize possible answers when taking surveys.

Salant cautioned me Tuesday about applying his results to the mayor's race in Chicago. "The more salient (important, high-profile) a race is, the smaller the effect is likely to be," he said. "It's smaller for statewide and federal elections where voters are more informed. But even still it could be decisive."

So is there a better way, a way to eliminate the impact of ballot position on our democracy?

Yes, but election officials say that printing and distributing

randomized ballots rotating top names would be costly and would harm voter education efforts that use sample ballots.

A way to level the field would be to remove the first-morning incentive and enter all candidates into the lottery, but Chicago Board of Elections spokesman Jim Allen said this would likely create another silly ritual — candidates lining up on the last hour of the last day in order to give their opponents the least possible amount of time to challenge their signatures.

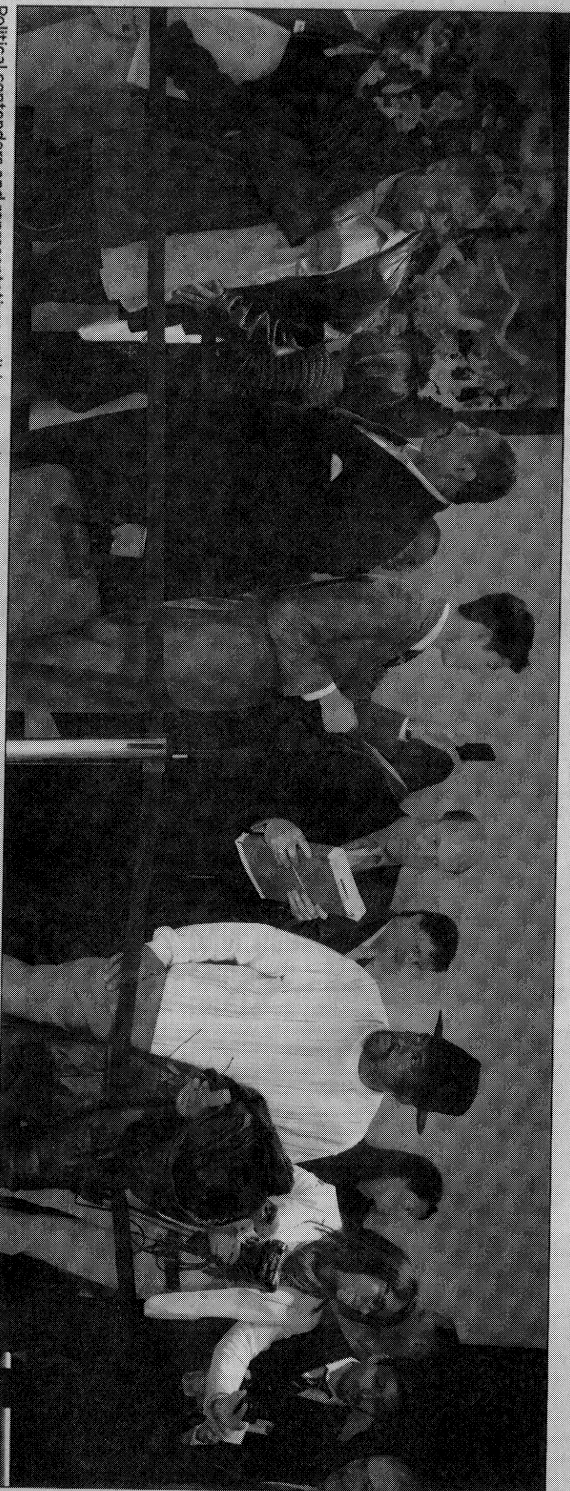
"Now, it sort of balances out," Allen said. "For the chance to be first on the ballot, you have to expose your petitions to maximum scrutiny."

A third way, a better way — a one-day filing period, all candidates in the lottery — would require a change in state law, Allen said.

Which better way would you vote for? Let me guess.

Read the Salant/Meredith paper and discuss this column at [chicagotribune.com/zorn](http://chicagotribune.com/zorn).





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