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 150 political candidates with their nominating petitions lining up outside the Chicago Board of Elections office in the Loop, the first candidate having arrived at 10 a.m. on Sunday, two questions come to mind:

Is it really worth it? Is there a better way?
The answer to the first question is qualified and somewhat surprising: Yes. Every candidate who's standing in line (or has a representa-
tive 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 influ-
enced by the order in which can-
didates' names appear on the ballot sounds like a superstition or old spouses' tales. As any voter having made the effort to get to the polls or obtain an ab-
sentee ballot, would make a mockery of the process by impu-
timately choosing the first name on the ballot.

But, as it turns out, numerous academic studies going back to at least the '90s on what's called "ballot order effects" have found that a small but sometimes sig-
nificant 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 Yusuf Salaita, a profes-
sor of managerial econom-
ics and decision sciences at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, and political scientist Marc Meredith of the University of Pennsyl-
vania. "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 7,500 city council, community college and school district elec-
tions in California from 1985 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 Salaita and Mere-
dith's research.

In races with two to four can-
didates, they found being listed first increased a candidate's percent-
age share of the vote by 1 to 3 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.

"Salaita cautioned me Tuesday about applying his results to the mayor's race in Chicago. "The more salient (important, high-
profile) a race, 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 to eliminate the impact of ballot position on our democracy?

Yes, but election officials say that printing and distributing

rallized ballots rotating top

names would be costly and would

larm voter education efforts that use sample ballots.

A way to level the field would be to remove the first-morning incentives 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 chances to be first on the ballot, you have to expose your petitions to main-
stream scrutiny."

A third way, a better way — a one-day filing period, all can-
didates in the lottery — would require a change in state law, Allen said. Which better way would you vote for? Let me know.

Read the Salaita/Meredith paper and discuss this column at chicagotribune.com/noturn.
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