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No. 1 on the ballot gets five-point edge: study

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Postmedia News

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Saturday, October 16, 2010

Canadian politicians can wax patriotic until they're red and white in the face, but it will only help them so much if they get poor placement on the ballot.

Though we know candidates named first earn a greater share of votes than they'd garner in any other spot on the ballot, a new study takes it a step further, suggesting that primary listing increases the chances of actually winning an election - at least at the municipal level - by roughly five percentage points.



"It means that in one out of 10 elections in which the candidate listed first won, he won only because he was listed first," says study co-author Yuval Salant, assistant professor of decision sciences at Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management. CREDIT: Matthew Lewis/Getty Images 1016ballots.jpg

"And if a candidate gains from being listed first, that means someone has to lose; that's the candidate who's in the middle."

Researchers found the person listed first on a ballot was 4.8 points likelier to win his or her seat than predicted by chance (the number of winners listed in first position were calculated and compared to the number statistically expected to win in that position).

By contrast, the candidate listed in the middle position saw the likelihood of victory slide by 2.5 percentage points, or a 7.2-point disadvantage from the candidate listed first, because of the placement.

The data is based on the outcomes of city council and school-board elections in California, where the State draws a random order of the alphabet and then lists nominees accordingly.

The first-candidate advantage was identified across a variety of election situations, including those in which multiple winners were chosen - which researchers say demonstrates that people's tendency to simply pick the first "good-enough" candidate, or candidates, isn't the whole story.

"In theory, there shouldn't be a difference between the first and the second in such elections," says Salant. "But . . . the first candidate is still more likely to win than the second candidate."

Co-author Marc Meredith says the findings make clear that the simplicity of listing nominees alphabetically probably requires a trade-off with what's fair.

"The problem is that it gives the advantage of being first, over and over, to the same candidates," says Meredith, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania.

"If the candidates listed first also go on to win, they get the additional benefits of incumbency. And we do find that incumbents benefit slightly more than non-incumbents from being listed first."

Political scientist Cameron Anderson says this would be most apt to occur in municipal

elections in which other cues are absent from the voting process. (Although most federal and provincial ballots in Canada do list A to Z, party affiliation and incumbency are typically noted).

"Voters can get around a lack of information if party name is listed, saying, 'Whoever is the Conservative candidate, I'm going to vote for him or her,' " says Anderson, an assistant professor at the University of Western Ontario.

"But, in Canada, most municipal elections don't have parties."

Jon Pammett, an elections expert with Ottawa's Carleton University, suggests the voters most likely to fall into this trap are those that feel morally obliged to be there.

"They regard voting as essential for a good citizen, but (have) low information about the candidates. Thus they fulfil their civic duty by voting, but don't give much thought as to who they vote for," says Pammett, a professor of political science.

"Randomizing candidate name order on individual ballots, as mentioned in the (study), would solve the problem."

Municipal elections are currently underway in Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba.

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