

Does Jones Beat Janczewski? How the Processing Fluency of Candidates' Surnames Affects their Electability

Jacob Harris

Department of Government
Cornell University

Overview

There are only **three** things voters are guaranteed to know about political candidates

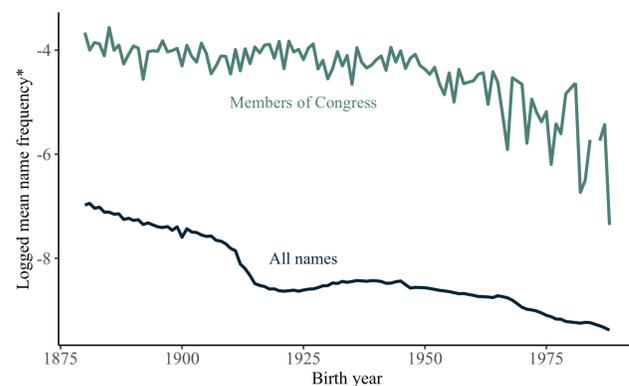
- Party
- Ballot order
- Name

Do names matter?

Introduction

Names have implications across a broad array of social outcomes. Common and easily pronounceable names are associated with greater popularity, increased perceptions of attractiveness, and corporate success [1]. We also know that voters have unstable preferences [2] and are easily influenced by apolitical factors like ballot order [3]. I provide a novel analysis of the effect of names on election outcomes. Specifically, I ask: **is the processing fluency (e.g. pronounceability) of political candidates' surnames correlated with their electoral success?**

Figure 1: Selection bias?: Congresspersons' names are far more common than the general public's



Source: U.S. Social Security Administration and <https://github.com/unitedstates/congress-legislators>
*Calculated as the mean of the proportion of all names each individual name accounts for in a given year

Data

Data sources:

- 2018 California school board elections (n = 2552).
- U.S. Senate general (n = 1198) and primary (n = 1798) elections from 1980-2018.
- Pronounceability ratings on all the unique surnames in both datasets from an MTurk survey.

Key variables:

- 1 The **dependent variable** is the percentage of the vote share each candidate received.
- 2 The **independent variable** is the mean processing fluency rating for each surname.

Methods

Linear mixed effects models are used to assess the relationship between processing fluency and vote share. I control for:

- Incumbency
- Sex
- Race (white dummy)
- Total votes cast (school board only)
- Seats/competitors ratio (school board only)
- Party (senate only)
- Year (senate only)
- # of primary opponents (senate primaries only)

Conclusion

Names matter. In school board and senate elections, processing fluency is associated with significantly greater vote share. This effect is quite pronounced for Whites in senate elections. Furthermore, these estimates likely underestimate the effect of processing fluency since they do not account for the selection bias that leads to those with common names being in Congress at unusually high rates (see Figure 1).

References

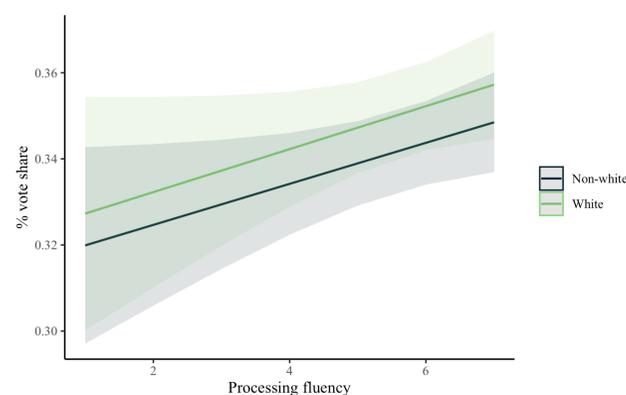
- [1] Simon M Laham, Peter Koval, and Adam L Alter. The name-pronunciation effect: Why people like mr. smith more than mr. colquhoun. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(3):752-756, 2012.
- [2] Philip E Converse. The nature of belief systems in mass publics (1964). *Critical review*, 18(1-3):1-74, 2006.
- [3] Joanne M Miller and Jon A Krosnick. The impact of candidate name order on election outcomes. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, pages 291-330, 1998.

Key Findings

- **Processing fluency is associated with significantly greater vote share in school board and senate elections.**
- **Whites benefit more from high fluency names relative to non-Whites in senate elections.**

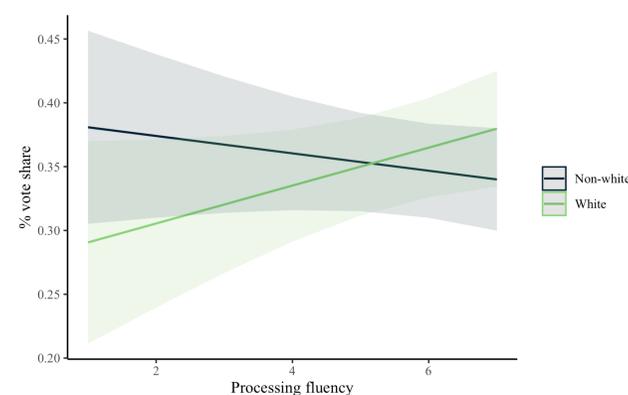
School Board Elections

Figure 2: Marginal effects of processing fluency on vote share



Senate Primary Elections

Figure 3: Marginal effects of processing fluency on vote share



Acknowledgements

Credit goes to Sergio Garcia-Rios for his methodological guidance and the beautiful poster template. I also appreciate Doug Kriner, Peter Enns, and Christopher Karpowitz for their advice on earlier versions of this project.

Contact Information

- Web: <https://jacob-harris.com/papers/>
- Email: jh2689@cornell.edu

Access the working paper here

