

Information, visibility and elections: Why electoral outcomes differ when voters are better informed

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Abstract. This article assesses the aggregate effect of information shortfall on the outcome of the last six Canadian elections. Building on Bartels' analysis, the authors find an information effect in three of the six elections examined, and in each case the information gap benefits the Liberal Party. That finding raises the question: why does information matter in some contexts but not in others? It is argued in this article that the information gap is related to lack of visibility. When and where all political parties have some degree of visibility, the less informed vote like the better informed, but when and where a party is hardly visible, the less informed are less likely to support that party. The less informed appear to consider a smaller set of options when they decide how to vote.

There is ample evidence, mostly from the United States, that many voters know little about the parties and their positions (Althaus 2003; Bennett 1988, 1996; Converse 1964, 1970; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Similar patterns are reported in other settings (for Canada, see Fournier 2002; Gidengil et al 2004; for international comparisons of political knowledge, see Bennett et al 1996; Milner 2001; Wattenberg 2007). People agree that the level of political information among the electorate is dismal. Disagreement exists, however, about the consequences of this lack of knowledge.

There are two contrasting positions on this issue. Those in the optimistic camp believe that it does not make much difference overall whether people are well or poorly informed. Optimists arrive at this position via two somewhat different lines of reasoning. Some acknowledge that information may matter at the individual level, but argue that, in the aggregate, it does not make much difference (Page & Shapiro 1992). The logic of the argument is informed by Condorcet's jury theorem, which stipulates that the probability of reaching a 'correct' decision in a modestly informed group increases with the size of that group (see Miller 1986; Grofman & Feld 1988; Lahda 1992). Thus, many individuals might vote differently if they were better informed, but this does not have a clear effect on the outcome of the election because these individual 'errors' cancel out in the aggregate. However, the logic of this argument breaks

down if there are systematic biases that push the uninformed in the same direction and this direction is different from what they would have chosen if they were better informed.

Other optimists argue that relatively uninformed voters are able to make the 'correct' choice when they decide how to vote because they use 'cues' or information 'shortcuts'. Even though they are not very well informed, they may know that some group they like or dislike supports or opposes party X, and this allows them to arrive at the same choice that they would have made were they better informed (Gerber & Lupia 1993; Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al 1991; Sniderman 1993). The crucial question is: Do these cues, or shortcuts, actually enable the poorly informed to make the 'right' choice? Clearly, many of these voters do not invest much time or energy in information processing and they may not be very good at assessing the relevance and quality of the cues they use (Kuklinski & Hurley 1994; Kuklinski & Quirk 2000).

Pessimists see the matter differently. They argue that uninformed voters' choices are suboptimal because their political judgement exhibits biases. The concern is that such voters rely on stereotypes, they are overconfident in their beliefs, they respond disproportionately to 'easy' arguments and they rely on scanty information about a candidate's policy positions (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000). Furthermore, voters have little incentive to assemble and process that information in a thoughtful way because the choice of a legislature and/or government is a collective good, and so their own personal decision does not matter much.

Perhaps the most direct evidence that information matters comes from deliberative polls, which show that many individuals change their mind after participating in a weekend of intense learning and deliberation (Fishkin 1997; Luskin et al 2002). The problem is that these 'natural experiments' do not allow us to sort out the specific impact of information versus that of deliberation.

The pessimists' criticisms have merit. After all, it is fair to assume that the risk of making a mistake in deciding how to vote decreases with the amount and quality of information a voter possesses. Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the relevance of these criticisms. Poorly informed voters may not be well equipped to make the 'correct' choices, but well informed citizens are not necessarily perfectly 'rational' either; they are not impervious to stereotypes, overconfidence or soft arguments. Information is not the only factor that affects the quality of the vote.

From a normative perspective, it is the aggregate consequence of information shortfall that is the most critical concern. And the aggregate effect is the focus of the following analysis. If Condorcet's jury theorem applies to this

context, we would expect some of the errors made by individual voters to cancel out. However, would the outcome of elections be substantially different if voters were better informed?

Because we are interested in systematic patterns, over and above random individual errors, we need to ask not only whether some parties are likely to be systematically advantaged or disadvantaged by voters' lack of information, but also whether information matters more in some contexts than in others. Most importantly, the reasons for this potential variation across parties and contexts require investigation. Because our objective is to determine when, where and why the less informed vote differently from others, the first step is to ascertain whether the vote choice of these two groups differs and whether that difference persists after socio-demographic characteristics and party identification are controlled. If it does, then the second step is to explain why the difference emerges in some contexts and not in others.

Building on Bartels' (1996) seminal analysis of information effects in American presidential elections, the analysis begins by measuring the specific impact of information on vote choice. We then simulate what the outcome of the election would have been if the least informed had voted like the better informed. Bartels estimates the effect of information both at the individual level and at the aggregate level, but our primary concern is with the most crucial aggregate-level question – namely: Do some parties gain or lose because of voters' lack of information?

The research strategy is similar to Bartels', but it also departs from his methodology in some important ways. First, we use richer measures of information. Bartels relied on a single indicator of information: interviewers' rating of respondents' general level of information about politics and public affairs. He justifies his choice on the basis of Zaller's (1985) finding that this was the 'single most effective information item' in the American National Election Studies. Relying on a single and indirect indicator, however, may not be the best approach.¹ We follow the common practice (Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Althaus 2003) of using multiple factual knowledge items to measure information.

Second, the simulations used here to ascertain the impact of information are more conservative than those utilised by Bartels. We conclude that information matters only if there is clear statistical evidence to that effect. Bartels reports that information has no statistically significant impact in three of the six elections he examines (see Bartels 1996: 209, Table 2), but still proceeds to estimate the impact of information in those three elections. Furthermore, Bartels estimates how different things would be if every voter were 'fully' informed. By contrast, our focus is on how different the outcome of the

election would have been if every voter were 'well' informed. The scenario we simulate works with more modest assumptions about voters' information levels.

Third, we examine the reasons why the least informed vote differently to the better informed. Bartels notes that the uninformed are more likely to vote for incumbents and Democrats, conjecturing that the uninformed are overwhelmed by the louder messages of the incumbent president or perhaps voting for the incumbent is the default option. Bartels (1996: 220) acknowledges that 'these and other possible explanations seem deserving of sustained investigation'. We take up Bartels' challenge and explore the reasons why the less informed vote differently from the better informed in some contexts but not in others.²

The data

To address these questions empirically, we draw on individual-level survey data from six Canadian federal elections between 1988 and 2006. The Canadian Election Studies (CES) offer an important advantage for the purposes of this research. Both the campaign and the post-election surveys include several political information questions; these allow us to construct finely grained political information scales.

Appendix A presents measures of information used for each election. There are both 'general' and 'campaign' questions, the latter dealing with the specifics of a particular election. The campaign questions are objective factual questions that require respondents to provide a correct answer as well as subjective questions, which invite respondents to rate their level of knowledge. Campaign questions pertain to the issues, the local candidates and the leaders. The issue questions are either 'promise' questions, which tap respondents' capacity to identify which party made a given promise, or 'placements', which ask whether a given party wants policy to move in a certain direction. In addition, in four election studies there are interviewers' ratings of the respondents' level of information. Cronbach's alpha coefficients range from 0.86 (in 1988) to 0.93 (in 1993). As we indicate below, the findings are not sensitive to variations in scale construction.

Appendix B shows the distribution of respondents on the overall information scale for each election. Our analysis excludes respondents from Quebec. The presence of the Bloc Québécois in that province (and its absence in other provinces) since 1993 means that the set of options offered to Quebec voters is different to that offered to voters elsewhere. It is not possible to compare levels of information from one election to the next because the questions vary.

Even so, the mean information score is around 0.5. Typically, slightly more than one-quarter of the respondents score below 0.3 and one-fifth above 0.7.³ Thus it is possible to compare the behaviour of the more and less informed within each election.

Do the least informed vote differently?

The place to begin is with a simple comparison of vote choice among the better and less informed segments of the electorate (see Table 1). The better informed are those who score above the median level of information (in a given election) and the less informed are those below the median. Table 1 shows a statistically significant relationship between information and vote choice in 1993, 1997 and 2000, but none in 1988, 2004 and 2006. In 1993, 1997 and 2000, the better informed are less inclined to vote Liberal (centre) and more likely to support the New Democratic Party (left) and Reform or Alliance (right) than the less informed. These differences might reflect the fact that the better informed have different socio-demographic characteristics or partisan predispositions. To explore that possibility, we estimate a multinomial logit model in which vote choice is regressed on a whole set of socio-demographic variables, plus our information scale.⁴

Like Althaus (2003) and contrary to Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and Bartels (1996), we also control for party identification. There is a modest correlation between information and party identification, and so the question is whether it is party identification that causes one to get informed or the reverse (we should not control for intervening variables when we wish to ascertain the 'total' effect of a factor; see Miller & Shanks 1996). We are inclined to believe that party identification is the antecedent variable, not information (for evidence that party identification develops early in the life cycle, see Achen 2002b; Jennings & Niemi 1981). There is an additional reason for controlling party identification. Partisans are better informed about their own parties than about the others, and party identification controls allow us to neutralise that bias. That being said, the findings presented here remain basically intact when we do not control for party identification.⁵

Table 2 reports the impact of information (with the full information scale) on vote choice when socio-demographic characteristics and party identification are controlled. The evidence is that information has no significant effect on vote choice in 1988, 2004 and 2006. However, the better informed were more prone to vote NDP (rather than Liberal) in each of the other three elections, and they were more likely to vote Conservative in 2000. The pattern observed in Table 2 is thus similar to the one shown in Table 1, before the

Table 1. Vote choice and information level (percentages)

	Less informed	More informed
<i>1988</i>		
Liberal	31.9	30.6
Conservative	44.4	47.9
NDP	23.7	21.5
(N)	(744)	(924)
χ^2		2.1420
<i>1993</i>		
Liberal	55.9	42.9
Reform	24.1	30.1
Conservative	12.6	17.4
NDP	7.4	9.6
(N)	(729)	(977)
χ^2		28.6080*
<i>1997</i>		
Liberal	47.0	35.1
Reform	24.3	33.9
Conservative	17.1	16.5
NDP	11.7	14.5
(N)	(626)	(835)
χ^2		25.9676*
<i>2000</i>		
Liberal	49.1	36.1
Alliance	27.5	38.3
Conservative	13.4	12.2
NDP	10.0	13.4
(N)	(551)	(800)
χ^2		28.3309*
<i>2004</i>		
Liberal	37.0	38.6
Conservative	40.3	40.4
NDP	22.7	21.0
(N)	(778)	(978)
χ^2		0.9489
<i>2006</i>		
Liberal	30.9	34.9
Conservative	47.3	42.5
NDP	21.8	22.6
(N)	(753)	(871)
χ^2		4.1178

Notes: Cell entries are weighted percentages. * Significant $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

Table 2. Multinomial logit estimation of vote choice outside Quebec: The impact of information

	Reference group: Liberal Party		Reference group: Conservative Party		Reference group: Reform/Alliance	
	Conservative	Reform/Alliance	NDP	Reform/Alliance	NDP	NDP
1988	-0.57 (0.52)	-	-0.36 (0.60)	-	0.21 (0.56)	-
1993	1.29 (0.76)	1.14 (0.62)	1.69 (0.87)*	-0.22 (0.78)	0.43 (1.05)	0.65 (0.91)
1997	0.40 (0.55)	0.93 (0.52)	1.62 (0.60)*	0.54 (0.58)	1.23 (0.65)	0.69 (0.63)
2000	1.28 (0.61)*	0.71 (0.52)	2.09 (0.77)*	-0.57 (0.63)	0.81 (0.87)	1.38 (0.82)
2004	-0.37 (0.35)	-	-0.56 (0.42)	-	-0.19 (0.43)	-
2006	-0.14 (0.60)	-	-0.10 (0.60)	-	0.04 (0.65)	-

Notes: Cell entries are the *information* logit coefficients. The coefficients indicate how the probability of voting for a given party rather than the reference party increases (positive coefficient) or decreases (negative coefficient) with level of information. The estimations include a party identification variable for each party and the following sociodemographic variables: region, religion, ethnicity, gender, language, marital status, education and rural/urban. * Significant $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

introduction of control variables: vote choice is correlated with information in three elections out of six.⁶ Intriguingly, Bartels (1996: 209) also notes that of the six American elections he analysed, the 'no information' effect hypothesis could be rejected in three cases.

Like previous research (Bartels 1996; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Althaus 2003), we do not control for the impact of political attitudes. There are two issues here. First, is there a correlation between information and political attitudes (like left/right orientation)? And, if there is, which comes first: information or political attitudes? Our view is that information is more likely to come first, even though causality may run in both directions – that is, people are more likely to change their views about politics as they become more informed than they are to invest more (or less) in information-seeking because of their attitudes.⁷ If that assumption holds, there is no need to control for attitudes (see Achen 2002a on the risks of overkill when too many control variables are incorporated).

Still, the empirical question remains: would the information effects disappear if we were to control for political attitudes? To rule out possible spuriousness, we performed one additional test with respect to the 2000 election. We first examined the correlations between overall levels of information and economic and social conservatism, which have both been shown to have had a substantial effect on vote choice in that election (Blais et al 2002). Correlations between these attitudes and information turn out to be very weak (0.00 for economic conservatism and -0.07 for social conservatism); the better informed are slightly less socially conservative. When these two attitudinal variables are introduced to our model, the impact of information is marginally stronger with respect to the Conservative vote (the coefficient is now significant at 0.02) and slightly weaker in the case of the NDP (the coefficient is now significant only at the 0.08 level). These two attitudes do not account for the information gap.

Another possibility to consider is that the better informed are less likely to vote Liberal because they are more likely to be 'ideologues'. According to that scenario, the correlation between information and not voting Liberal could be spurious. Ideologues tend not to vote Liberal because the Liberals are the party of 'moderation', in the centre of the political spectrum, and ideologues tend to be informed because they follow politics. Again the issue is which comes first. It seems plausible that people who do not follow politics, the uninformed, are less likely to develop strong views and they thus appear to be more moderate. Yet the empirical question, once again, is whether there is a correlation between 'moderation' (or 'extremism') and information. Again, we use the 2000 election. We constructed an 'extremism' index, which indicates how strongly positive or negative a person feels about the parties.⁸ A positive correlation (0.21) between information and 'extremism' is evident, but when

the extremism variable is introduced, the information effects remain intact (the Conservative coefficient is significant at 0.05 and the NDP one at 0.01).

Table 2 is based on a model in which information is assumed to have an 'additive' impact.⁹ Following Bartels, we also tested more complex interactive models in which information was allowed to interact with each of our socio-demographic and party identification variables. Those analyses indicate no significant joint interaction effects in 1988 and 1997. In 2004 and 2006, there are significant interaction effects (and not simple additive impact), but the simulations based on interactive effects suggest that the net impact on parties' vote shares is always minimal (one percentage point or less). As for 1993 and 2000, the simulations of the additive and interactive models concerning the net effect on the parties yielded very similar results.¹⁰ Consequently, the simulations presented are based on the simpler models.

Table 3 presents the implications of these findings for the three elections in which information matters. In this case, we estimate each respondent's predicted probability of voting for each party if he or she had been 'well' informed, and assume that a well informed voter would typically have had a score of 0.7 on our information scale. Recall that our primary interest is in exploring the scenario under which every voter was 'well' rather than 'perfectly' informed, and we find that in each election at least 10 per cent of our respondents have an information score of 0.7 or above. Table 3 compares the mean predicted probability of voting for each party, across all respondents, under a scenario in which everyone was assumed to have a score of 0.7 on the information scale (with all other variables kept constant) and under a scenario under which everyone retained her actual information score.

These data show how much the mean predicted probability of voting for a party would increase (or decrease) if every individual were well informed. For instance, the mean predicted probability of voting Liberal in 1993 is 45 per cent when everyone is assumed to be at 0.7 on the information level scale (keeping

Table 3. The impact of information on the outcome of the election

	Liberal	Conservative	Reform/Alliance	NDP
1993	-5.0	+1.8	+1.7	+1.5
1997	-3.4	-0.5	+1.5	+2.4
2000	-4.5	+1.4	-0.1	+3.2

Notes: Cell entries are the difference, in percentage points, between the mean predicted probability of voting under a scenario of high information (everybody being at 0.7 on the information scale) and under observed levels of information. E.g., the simulations suggest that in 1993 the Liberal vote would have been 5 percentage points lower if all voters had been at 0.7 on the information scale.

everything else constant), compared to 50 per cent when every individual keeps his or her actual information score. The implication is that the Liberal vote would have been 5 percentage points lower in that election if all voters had been well informed. These data indicate that in each election, the main loser would have been the Liberal Party: the party would have received 3 to 5 fewer percentage points in those three elections. In 1997 and 2000, the main beneficiary would have been the (leftist) NDP while, in 1993, information gains would have benefited the Conservatives, the NDP and Reform equally.

Why are the less informed more inclined to vote Liberal?

The most consistent pattern to emerge in Canada concerns the lesser propensity of the better informed, and the greater propensity of the less informed, to vote Liberal rather than NDP, in 1993, 1997 and 2000. What is the explanation for this pattern? According to Bartels (1996: 200), incumbent presidents perform better among the uninformed, perhaps because the less politically aware are less exposed to the challenger's weaker messages or because the incumbent is perceived to be the default option. At first blush, the interpretation does not seem to hold in Canada. There is a pro-incumbent government bias in only two (1997 and 2000) of the elections examined here. In 1988 and 1993, the incumbent Conservatives did not benefit from an information gap, nor did the governing Liberals benefit in 2004 and 2006. At a deeper level, however, Bartels' conjecture may well hold true. He suggests that the less informed may be less prone to vote for the presidential challenger because those who hardly follow politics get to know little about the challenger and what he stands for. The challenger may lack visibility.

It is quite possible that a similar process applies to the Canadian setting, but that it works through a different route. In American presidential (and congressional) elections, the main visibility gap is between the incumbent and the challenger. In the Canadian setting, the Liberal Party, the 'natural' government party, has by far the greatest visibility. It has won a plurality of the vote in 15 of the 20 elections held since 1945 and formed the government 45 of the last 60 years (Blais 2005). If the Liberals are the most visible party brand in federal politics, then the NDP is probably the least visible of the main parties. Unlike the old Progressive Conservatives, the Reform/Alliance, or the new Conservative Party, the NDP has never formed the government or even been the official opposition. Tellingly, in their analysis of the 1997 election, Nevitte et al (2000) referred to the NDP as being 'Off the Radar Screen'. The information gaps that emerge in Canada, as in the United States, seem to reflect the impact of visibility. The less informed are less likely to vote for less visible candidates

or parties because these parties' or candidates' messages are too weak to reach them.

That hypothesis can be indirectly tested by looking at campaign spending at the constituency level. To the extent that there is a strong connection between campaign spending and familiarity among voters (name recall and recognition; see Jacobson 2006a, 2006b), it is reasonable to assume that the party/candidate that spends the least in a constituency is also the least visible. Using the level of campaign spending as a proxy for the degree of visibility of the party in a constituency, Table 4 presents a first test of the hypothesis. The table shows the distribution of voters who lived in constituencies in which each of the main parties was basically invisible – that is, the party spent less than CAN\$10,000. There are some intriguing parallels between spending patterns and the information gaps shown in Table 2. First, the Liberal Party was the only party that was visible (almost) everywhere in every election. Second, in every election, the NDP was the party that suffered most from lack of visibility. Third, the NDP's visibility handicap was less severe in 1988, 2004 and 2006 – the three elections in which no information gap emerges. Fourth, the only year (2000) that the Progressive Conservatives lacked visibility (in one-third of the constituencies) was precisely the only year when the less informed were significantly less likely to vote PC (Table 2). The convergence between spending patterns and the presence and nature of information effect is striking.

The hypothesis that the information gap in the propensity to vote Liberal stems from the lack of visibility of some parties/candidates in some constituencies can be put to a more formal test. Table 5 pools the 1993, 1997 and 2000 elections – the three elections where a significant information effect was revealed. The dependent variable is whether or not one voted Liberal.¹¹ As before, the independent variables are the information scale, socio-demographic variables and party identification. The first column of

Table 4. The proportion of respondents living in constituencies in which parties spent less than CAN\$10,000 (percentages)

	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
Liberal	6	2	1	4	0	1
Progressive Conservative	0	2	14	38	–	–
Conservative	–	–	–	–	2	0
NDP	21	38	37	52	30	24
Reform/Alliance	–	19	14	10	–	–
Liberals' competitor(s)	21	46	56	74	31	19

Source: *Contributions and Expenses*, Elections Canada Online (www.elections.ca).

Table 5. Logit estimation of liberal vote choice outside Quebec

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Info	-0.98 (0.28)*	-17.05 (5.25)*	-3.04 (7.92)
Spending PC (log)	-	-0.16 (0.12)	-0.14 (0.44)
Spending NDP (log)	-	-0.24 (0.10)*	-0.18 (0.13)
Spending Reform/Alliance (log)	-	-0.54 (0.19)*	-
Info X spending PC (log)	-	0.24 (0.23)	0.26 (0.70)
Info X spending NDP (log)	-	0.35 (0.20)	0.08 (0.19)
Info X spending Reform/Alliance (log)	-	1.01 (0.37)*	-
Liberal party ID	2.51 (0.20)*	2.50 (0.20)*	2.13 (0.14)*
Conservative party ID	-1.45 (0.28)*	-1.45 (0.28)*	-2.62 (0.23)*
NDP party ID	-1.88 (0.34)*	-1.89 (0.34)*	-1.47 (0.23)*
Atlantic	-0.71 (0.15)*	-0.80 (0.19)*	0.34 (0.17)*
West	-0.74 (0.11)*	-0.78 (0.12)*	-0.60 (0.12)*
Catholic	0.38 (0.12)*	0.37 (0.12)*	0.25 (0.13)
Non-religious	0.12 (0.15)	0.15 (0.15)	-0.08 (0.15)
North-European	-0.63 (0.16)*	-0.63 (0.16)*	0.01 (0.15)
Non-European	0.73 (0.23)*	0.75 (0.23)*	0.48 (0.23)*
Male	0.09 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)
Other language	0.15 (0.16)	0.15 (0.16)	0.00 (0.03)
Married	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.12)
Below high school	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.17 (0.15)	-0.00 (0.14)
Rural	-0.20 (0.13)*	-0.22 (0.13)	-
1993 (dummy)	0.41 (0.13)*	0.50 (0.17)*	-
1997 (dummy)	0.02 (0.12)	0.09 (0.14)	-
2004 (dummy)	-	-	0.17 (0.15)
2006 (dummy)	-	-	-0.46 (0.20)*
Constant	0.24 (0.18)	9.72 (2.64)*	2.46 (4.92)
Pseudo R ²	0.22	0.23	0.33
N	2,684	2,684	3,199

Notes: Cell entries are logit coefficients. Model 1 and Model 2 show pooled data from the 1993, 1997 and 2000 elections. Model 3 shows pooled data from 1988, 2004 and 2006 elections. Reform/Alliance identification is dropped because it predicts failure to vote Liberal perfectly. * Significant $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

Table 5 confirms the presence of a significant information gap: the better informed are less prone to vote Liberal. Everything else being equal, the mean probability of voting Liberal goes from 50 per cent if a voter is at 0.3 on the information scale to 43 per cent if he or she is at 0.7 – a seven percentage point

difference. Column 2 of Table 5 incorporates spending by each of the Liberals' three competitors in the respondent's constituency, plus interaction terms with information. In this case, there are two sets of expectations. First, the higher the spending by the Liberals' rivals (the more visible the non-Liberal options), the less likely one is to vote Liberal. Second, and most importantly, the amount of spending (the degree of visibility) should matter most to the least informed and least to the best informed. The interaction terms (Info X spending) should have a positive coefficient, indicating that the negative information gap weakens as spending by the Liberals' rivals increases. These expectations are confirmed. Each of the three spending variables has the predicted negative coefficient (two of the coefficients are statistically significant and the three are jointly significant). Each of the three interaction terms has a positive coefficient (one is statistically significant and they are jointly significant).

The implications of these findings are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the mean predicted probability of voting Liberal among the less (those at 0.3 on the scale) and the better (at 0.7) informed, under four scenarios in which the Liberals' three competitors each spend CAN\$10,000, CAN\$20,000, CAN\$30,000 or CAN\$40,000 in the respondent's constituency. There is a big information gap in those constituencies where the Liberals' rivals are hardly

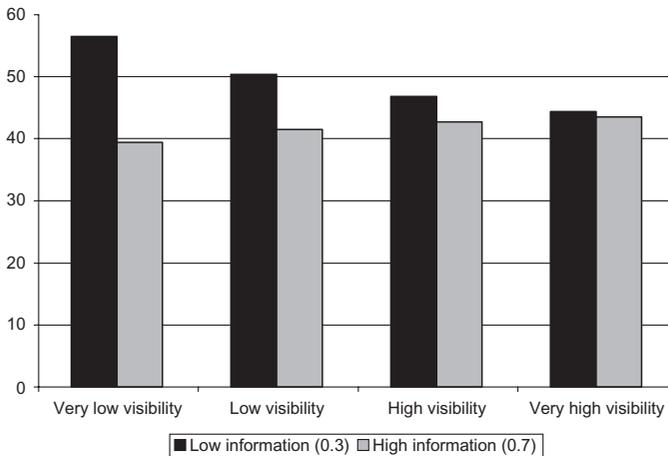


Figure 1. Information, Liberals' competitors visibility and Liberal vote.

Notes: Very low visibility = Liberals' competitors spend CAN\$10,000 each. Low visibility = Liberals' competitors spend CAN\$20,000 each. High visibility = Liberals' competitors spend CAN\$30,000 each. Very high visibility = Liberals' competitors spend CAN\$40,000 each. The figures indicate that among those residing in constituencies where each of the Liberals' competitors spent CAN\$10,000, the mean predicted probability of voting Liberal is 56 per cent among the less informed, compared to 39 per cent among the better informed.

visible (spending only CAN\$10,000 each); the propensity to vote Liberal is 17 points higher among the less informed. Notice that this information gap vanishes in constituencies where each party spends CAN\$40,000. The implication is that uninformed voters are more prone to vote Liberal because the Liberal Party is the most visible party brand in Canada. An information gap emerges only when and where other parties or candidates fail to spend enough in the local constituency to reach the less informed.

The above analysis is restricted to the 1993, 1997 and 2000 elections, but if the crucial factor is constituency-level visibility, should we not see differences across constituencies in 1988, 2004 and 2006 as well? It is not possible to pool all six elections together because of variations in the Canadian party system, but it is possible to pool the 1988, 2004 and 2006 data.¹² The results are presented in the last column of Table 5 (model 3). As expected, spending by the Conservatives and the NDP decreases the propensity to vote Liberal, and the impact of spending is weaker among the better informed. Yet none of the coefficients is statistically significant, and the interaction terms are very weak. It would seem that local visibility mattered only in 1993, 1997 and 2000.

Perhaps, it is the absence of *both* national and local visibility that counts. As mentioned above, the Liberal brand is the most well known at the national level, and the NDP might be the least well known, though things may not have been that clear in 1993, when the Reform Party was still a 'new' party. Table 6 shows total spending by the national parties at each election. The table indicates that it was only in 1988, 2004 and 2006 that each of the main parties spent over CAN\$10 million. The NDP spent much less in 1997 and 2000, as did Reform in 1993 and 1997, and the Progressive Conservatives in 2000. In those elections, some of the major parties suffered from lack of visibility both at the national and the local levels.

Another potential explanation for why the information gap emerged only in 1993, 1997 and 2000 is that these were the elections with a four-party system

Table 6. Political party spending (million CAN\$)

	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
Liberal	10.4	12.6	13.5	14.3	17.3	17.4
Progressive Conservative	12.1	13.3	12.4	4.6	–	–
Conservative	–	–	–	–	18.0	18.0
NDP	10.9	9.4	7.2	7.2	12.5	13.5
Reform/Alliance	–	1.9	5.9	11.1	–	–

Note: 2006 constant Canadian dollars.

Source: *Contributions and Expenses*, Elections Canada Online (www.elections.ca).

(outside Quebec). If less informed voters are more prone to vote 'incorrectly' the problem might be exacerbated when the number of options increases. The less informed would find it more difficult to decide how to vote when there are 'too many' options, in the same way as they seem more inclined to abstain because the information costs are getting too high (Jusko & Shively 2005). That hypothesis cannot be fully tested with these data, but the findings are consistent with that interpretation.¹³ The visibility hypothesis, for which we have better data, has firmer support, but the possibility that the information gap increases with the number of options available cannot be ruled out.¹⁴

Conclusion

Many voters are poorly informed, but does it matter? Would a better informed electorate produce different electoral outcomes? Building on Bartels, this analysis has examined how and why information matters in some contexts and not in others. There is evidence of an information gap in three of the six Canadian elections under investigation. In each case, the information gap benefits the Liberal Party. In 1993, 1997 and 2000, the less informed were more prone to vote Liberal, and, as a consequence, the Liberals in each case would have received fewer votes if voters had been more informed.

These findings are broadly consistent with those reported by Bartels' investigation of information effects in the American setting. Like Bartels, we find a net information gap at least in some elections. Regardless of the differences between the Canadian parliamentary multiparty system and the American presidential two-party system, the magnitude and the frequency of the information gaps appear to be strikingly similar. Second, this study provides evidence of the sources of the information gap. Bartels was the first to propose a methodology for ascertaining information effects and for documenting them. He noted that information effects seemed to benefit incumbent presidential candidates and speculated that this is attributable to visibility.

This analysis both documents the presence of information effects in recent Canadian elections and shows that while incumbent governments do not systematically benefit from voters' lack of information in Canada, Bartels' conjecture about visibility is empirically justified: information effects do appear to be the product of visibility gaps. The less informed are more prone to vote for the best known party brand, the Liberal Party, and they are less inclined to support the least visible party, the NDP. Those effects are confined to elections where some of the national parties appear less visible and to constituencies where the Liberals' rivals do not spend enough to reach the less informed.

These findings underscore the importance of campaign finance regulation. It matters a lot whether a party or candidate is able to spend at least a minimal amount in a given constituency. Moreover, it matters particularly for the least attentive segment of the electorate. It would seem that the least attentive do not necessarily consider the full set of options, they just choose among the two or three parties they have heard about. Campaign regulations typically cap spending in order to prevent any one candidate or party from dramatically outspending its competitors. A more positive approach, suggested by our findings, might be to provide all candidates with a minimal amount of public funding (or free broadcast time).

The effects documented here are very similar in magnitude to those reported by Bartels, and they are quite modest (three to five percentage points). That position might point to the conclusion that there is not much cause for concern here. Certainly, according to our estimations, the Liberal Party would have maintained a plurality of the vote in 1993, 1997 and 2000 in the absence of information effects. The ultimate outcome of the election would have been the same. And certainly, that same verdict applies to Bartels' findings: in each of the six presidential elections he examined, the winner would have been the same.

However, a net overall difference in vote share of three to five points is not negligible. In the 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian elections, for instance, the net effect of the lack of information made a bigger difference than the net effects of the economy (Blais et al 2004, Table 1). And there is evidence that parties (both winning and losing) behave differently depending on the size of victory (Fowler & Smirnov 2007). Furthermore, in at least one case (namely 1997), the outcome of the election would have been different. In that election, according to our findings, the Liberals would have received 35 per cent of the vote instead of 38 per cent, in the absence of information effects. In 1997, the Liberals won only 155 seats out of 301, barely enough to form a majority government. With a three percentage point lower vote share, they would almost certainly not have formed a majority government. Most importantly, perhaps, the information gap uncovered in this study may contribute to weakening party competition. The main beneficiary of (lack of) information effects is the Liberal Party. The information effect gives that party an edge among the least informed fraction of the electorate, which may explain why the Liberals became the 'national party of government': they are difficult to dislodge.

It is also noteworthy that in 1993, 1997 and 2000, the better informed were more prone to support the weakest of the 'major' parties, the NDP. Yet should not the better informed think more strategically? Should they not be particularly prone *not* to vote for that party, especially where the party is hardly visible and is very unlikely to win? Our findings suggest that voting is more

expressive than instrumental – a conclusion that is consistent with the relatively modest amount of strategic voting that has been observed in Canadian elections (Blais et al 2001).

Finally, these findings seem to introduce a somewhat different perspective on the debate about information ‘shortcuts’. The essence of the debate is not whether the less informed use shortcuts or not, it concerns the ‘efficiency’ of these shortcuts. Do the cues that the less informed employ allow them to make the choice that they would make were they better informed? The main challenge faced by the less informed may not be that they rely on unreliable shortcuts when comparing the options. In fact, our findings are quite encouraging in one sense. When all the parties are visible, there is no information effect; the shortcuts that the less informed employ seem to work. The most important problem is that the less informed often do not consider the full set of options. The most crucial simplification, or ‘shortcut’, occurs when the choice set is identified. For the less informed, when some parties are much less visible, the ‘real’ range of options is more limited.

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Appendix A. Information scale

1988

Campaign candidates

Have the federal (N) party nominated a candidate in your riding yet?

Do you happen to remember the name of the (N) candidate in your riding?

Campaign issues

Does the federal (N) party think that much more, somewhat more, about the same as now, some less, or much less should be done to promote French?

Does the federal (N) party think that Canada should be much closer to the United States, somewhat closer, about the same as now, somewhat more distant or much more distant?

Does the federal (N) party think the level of taxes and services should be much higher, somewhat higher, about the same, somewhat lower or much lower?

Subjective knowledge of leaders and candidates

* For each name, please tell me whether you know quite a lot, a fair amount, just a little, or nothing at all about the person.

Now I want to ask about the (N) candidate in your riding. Did you get to know quite a lot, a fair amount, just a little, or nothing at all about him or her?

1993*Campaign issues*

How much does the federal (N) party want to do to promote French/want to do for Québec?

Does the federal (N) party want Canada to have much closer ties with the United States, somewhat closer, about the same as now, somewhat more distant or much more distant?

Does the federal (N) party want to do much more, somewhat more, about the same as now, somewhat less, or much less for business people?

Do you happen to know which of the federal parties support the GST?

Do you happen to know which of the federal parties oppose the GST?

How much power does the federal (N) party want unions to have?

What does the federal (N) party want to do for women?

What does the federal (N) party want to do for racial minorities?

Do you happen to know which party promised to do away with the NAFTA?

Do you happen to know which party promised to eliminate the deficit in 3 years?

Do you happen to know which party promised to eliminate the deficit in 5 years?

Do you happen to know which party promised to increase spending on public works?

Subjective knowledge of leaders and candidates

* Do you feel very well, fairly well, not very well or not at all informed about [leader]?

Do you feel very well, fairly well, not very well or not at all informed about (N) party candidate?

Subjective knowledge of issues

* Would you say you are very well informed, fairly well informed, not very well informed, or not at all informed about the issues in the campaign?

*Interviewer rating: Level of knowledge***1997***General knowledge*

Have you heard about the Somalia Affair?

Do you recall the name of the President of the United States?

Do you recall the name of the Minister of Finance of Canada?

Do you recall the name of the premier or government leader of your province?

Do you recall the name of the first woman to be Prime Minister of Canada?

Campaign issues

Do you think the (N) party wants to cut taxes, increase taxes, or keep taxes as they are?

How much does the (N) party want to do for Québec: more, less, or about the same as now?

* Do you happen to recall which party is promising to lower personal income taxes by 10%?

* Do you happen to recall which party is promising to cut unemployment in half by year 2001?

* Do you remember which party is against recognizing Québec as a distinct society?

Do you remember which party said all provinces should be treated equally?

Subjective knowledge of leaders

* Do you know a lot, a little, or nothing at all about [leader]?

*Interviewer rating: Level of knowledge***2000***General knowledge*

Do you recall the name of the Minister of Finance of Canada?

Do you recall the name of the premier of your province?

Do you recall the name of the Prime Minister of Canada at the time of the FTA with the United States?

Do you happen to know the capital of the United States?

Campaign leaders

* Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the federal (N) party?

Campaign issues

Do you think the (N) party is: on the left, on the right, in the center?

- * Do you happen to remember which party is promising a single tax rate for people earning less than one hundred thousand dollars a year?
- * Do you remember which party is proposing a national prescription drug plan?
- * Which party is promising a law to fight criminal biker gangs?
- * Do you happen to recall which party is proposing a law to pay back the debt in 25 years?

Does the federal (N) party want the provincial governments to have more power than now, less power or about the same as now?

Does the federal (N) party want the federal government to have more power, less power or about the same as now?

Does the federal (N) party want it to be very easy, quite easy, quite difficult or very difficult for women to get an abortion?

Do you happen to recall which party proposed to use half of the surplus to cut taxes and pay down the debt and half to spend on health care and social programs?

Do you happen to recall which party says that high taxes have produced a brain drain from Canada to the USA?

Do you happen to remember which party says that tougher sentences will not reduce youth violence?

Do you happen to recall which party says that a strong federal government is essential to preserve the Canadian health system?

2004

General knowledge

Do you happen to recall the name of the premier of your province?

Do you happen to recall the name of the Minister of Finance of Canada?

Do you recall the name of the British Prime Minister?

Do you happen to know the name of the female cabinet minister who ran against Paul Martin for the leadership of the Liberal Party?

Do you happen to know which government has the PRIMARY responsibility for health, education and social welfare? The federal government, the provincial government, or the municipal government?

Campaign leaders

* Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the federal (N) party?

Campaign issues

Do you happen to recall which party is promising to get rid of the gun registry?

Which party is promising to do away with the federal sales tax on family essentials?

Which party is promising to increase military spending by 2 billion dollars each year?

Which party is promising to spend 250 million for fighting AIDS in poor countries?

Do you happen to recall which party is promising to spend 4 billion dollars to reduce waiting times for surgeries?

Which party is promising an inheritance tax on estates over 1 million dollars?

Interviewer rating: Level of knowledge

2006

General knowledge

Do you happen to recall the name of the premier of your province?

Do you recall the name of the British Prime Minister?

Do you happen to recall the name of a female minister in the federal government?

Do you happen to recall the name of the judge who is heading the commission of inquiry into the sponsorship scandal?

Campaign leaders

* Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the federal (N) party?

* Which party is promising to cut the GST from 7 to 5 percent?

Interviewer rating: Level of knowledge

* Question asked in both the campaign and the post-election surveys

Appendix B. Information scale (percentages)

Information	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
0/.099999	1.4	3.5	4.1	6.8	8.9	4.7
0.1/.199999	3.9	9.2	9.9	9.1	6.5	3.0
0.2/.299999	5.1	16.7	12.6	12.3	8.9	2.9
0.3/.399999	12.5	16.5	14.0	18.3	7.5	3.7
0.4/.49999999	16.0	17.4	14.0	16.2	9.8	7.0
0.5/.599999	16.7	12.6	16.4	14.4	13.0	7.8

Appendix B. Continued.

Information	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
0.6/.699999	20.1	12.1	15.0	11.5	10.5	9.6
0.7/.799999	13.7	8.1	9.4	7.7	16.1	13.5
0.8/.899999	9.5	3.8	3.8	3.8	13.9	22.0
0.9/1	1.1	0.3	0.8	0.0	5.1	25.8
N	2,284	2,173	2,058	1,918	2,431	2,469
Mean	0.55	0.44	0.46	0.41	0.53	0.70

Notes

1. On the advantage of multiple over single indicators, see Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991: 56–59). It should be kept in mind that Zaller's analysis was based on a pilot study.
2. We subscribe to Achen's (2002a) view that in order to be compelling an explanation must have 'microfoundations'.
3. Information scores are higher in 2006 because there was only one promise question and because the Conservative promise on the GST reduction was exceptionally well known. Half of the 2006 CES respondents had already been interviewed in 2004. We performed an additional analysis with those panel respondents, using their information level as measured in 2004. We obtained similar (nil) findings about the impact of information.
4. The socio-demographic characteristics included in the analysis (region, religion, ethnicity, gender, marital status, education and rural/urban residence) are those that have been shown to be related to vote choice in Canada (Blais et al 2002).
5. More specifically, we find no information effect in 1988 or 2006. The only difference emerges in 2004, where we observe a small information effect (significant at 0.04) in the absence of controls for party identification, but that small effect (the better informed are more likely to vote Liberal than NDP) is inconsistent with that found in previous elections. The estimations reported here are based on simple dummy variables that distinguish partisans and non-partisans. We have also performed analyses that measure strength of party identification. The findings are very similar. The only small difference is that the NDP coefficient in 1997 is significant at 0.06 rather than at 0.05.
6. It could be argued that we find information effects in 1993, 1997 and 2000 because information was 'better' measured in those election studies (there are more indicators). To check that possibility we performed analyses of the 1988 and 1993 elections using only the information questions that were common to the two election studies. The pattern was the same: we find an information effect in 1993, but not in 1988. We performed the same test for 2000 and 2004, and again it is only in 2000 that an information effect emerges. We also replicated the initial analyses using either only campaign issue questions (possible for all elections except 2006) or only general knowledge (possible from 1997 onwards) and the same patterns emerged.
7. The fact that interest in public affairs seems to exhibit strong stability over time (Jennings & Niemi 1981: 28) is consistent with our position.

8. On that index, an individual who gives a score of 0 or 100 to every party would get a score of 1 and one who gives 50 (the middle of the scale) to everyone would get a score of 0.
9. Strictly speaking, the effect of any variable depends on the values of the other variables in a multinomial estimation and therefore there is no 'additive' impact. We simply mean a model without any interactive term.
10. These results are available upon request from the authors.
11. We use a simple logit estimation rather than a multinomial logit because the focus is on the greater propensity of the less informed to vote Liberal. We have performed a multinomial logit estimation, and the findings are very similar.
12. This assumes, of course, that the 'new' Conservative Party created in 2004 resembles the 'old' Progressive Conservative Party before 1993. We have also performed analyses pooling only 2004 and 2006, and the results are similar.
13. We thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that hypothesis. The Reform Party did not present candidates everywhere in 1993, so that it could be possible to test the hypothesis by comparing the patterns where there were three and four main parties running. Unfortunately, there were only 11 constituencies (outside Quebec) where there was no Reform candidate, and this constitutes less than 5 per cent of our sample.
14. We should note, however, that Bartels (1996) did *not* find a larger information effect in the presence of a strong third candidate (Perot, in 1992).

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