Voter Behavior Towards Natural Areas Protection

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This article describes nationwide and local trends in voter support for the protection of natural areas (i.e., forests, wildlife habitat and watersheds) and how ballot statement design has been found to influence voter behavior.

Where Conservation Measures Occur

Public demand for conserved land and open space often occurs in response to pressure from development in communities located near urban areas. Rural areas experience less pressure from development, but landownership of natural areas can be frequently transferred, which can result in smaller parcel sizes and increased habitat fragmentation. Natural landscapes in rural areas, however, may also have a relatively high ecological and social value, because they are more likely to contain healthy ecosystems and continuous habitat for wildlife. Voter support can help protect undeveloped lands before they experience changes in the landscape in both urban and rural areas.

History of Ballot Initiatives

As early as 1897, states began to adopt ballot initiatives to protect natural resources in response to public concerns that state legislators were too strongly influenced by corporations and monopolies (Williamson 1998). Today, ballot measures are still being used to protect undeveloped lands by authorizing the funding mechanisms necessary to support land acquisition, conservation easements and growth management plans (Bengston, et al. 2004). Funding mechanisms often include bond issues or increases in property or development taxes. In Pennsylvania, the legislator decides when a proposed legislation or constitutional amendment can go to ballot for a statewide election. However, citizens in municipalities and counties, that have home rule or a charter, can initiate ballot measures to make a charter amendment (e.g., increase property taxes) to help finance land conservation activities.

Nationwide and Local Voting Trends

Nationwide, measures that protect open space and rural lands are often well supported by voters. A recent census by the Trust for Public Lands found between 1996 and 2018 there were approximately 2,705 open space measures held at multiple government levels throughout the U.S. Of this, over 74.5% (1,973) were approved and resulted in over $78 billion in public funds to be used for land conservation (TPL, 2014)

Pennsylvania is a national leader, in the total number of open space measures advanced for voter approval. Since 1996, Pennsylvania voters passed 123 out of 154 measures (80%) and approved almost $1.4 billion in conservation funds. While almost all measures supported the protection of open space and farmlands, very few (14.2%) also provided funding for the conservation of forests, wildlife habitat and watersheds (i.e., natural areas). These measures passed 77% of the time, and approved almost $500 million in conservation funding. The measures also occurred more frequently in counties experiencing pressure from development (i.e., Adams, Bucks, Chester, Cumberland, Leigh, Monroe, Montgomery, Northampton, and York counties).

Voting and Decision-Making

There are many factors that can influence how voters make decisions about protecting open space. Ideally, voters take the time to make informed decisions about the measure that will be presented to them. However, in many cases, voters will have limited time and resources and tend to focus their attention on just a few measures or candidates (Aidt 2000). This means that at the ballot box, voters will sometimes consider measures for which they have limited information.

Game theory provides insights into how people make important decisions when they have little information, or when their understanding of the issue is “bounded”. In many cases people will rely on heuristic strategies to make important decisions. A heuristic strategy is a mental short cut that eases the difficult of making complex decisions, such as a rule of thumb, or an intuitive judgment. Voters will often use heuristic strategies when considering a candidate they don’t know, or if they have to consider a large number of voting decisions.

Resent research has found that how the ballot statement is designed can prompt voters to use heuristic strategies (Kreye et al., 2019). The analysis contained over 70 land conservation referendums, occurring between 1991 and 2013 in the Eastern US, and found that voters seem to prefer ballot statements that require less mental work and support simpler decision-making strategies. When the voter has not gathered sufficient information outside the ballot box, and the amount of information that they have to consider in the ballot statement is limited, the voter may be compelled to use mental shortcuts. This preference for a simpler ballot statements also appears to foster a more positive response towards the proposed measure itself. In other words, when voters feel comfortable about the decision-making process, they may respond more positively towards the measure.

Ballot Statement Design and Decision-Making

Voting is often considered analogous to a consumer purchasing a good or service. Economic theory asserts that people will often make purchasing decisions that maximize their wellbeing at the lowest cost. How conservation benefits are described in the ballot statement (e.g., wildlife habitat) can be interpreted by voters as a description of how they may benefit. Research has found ballot statements that use fewer or no descriptions of expected benefits were more likely to receive a yes vote (Kreye et al., 2019). From a psychological perspective, one may assume that voters would be averse to voting yes when the selection is limited. However, this aversion may not be manifested in cases where there are no other program options from which to select from (Heath and Tversky 1991). Experimental studies have also shown that choice patterns sometimes conflict with current theoretical and common-sense ideas about the positive effect of added alternatives (Huber and Puto 1983). Voter's preference for less information suggests that voters prefer to use inductive (i.e., not rational) reasoning strategies to assess outcomes. In low information contexts a simple statement may also appear less constrained and voters may assume they would likely be better off if the referendum passed.

Voters will also consider cost or who will likely pay for the conservation measure. Research has found that citizens often prefer that the costs of conservation be placed on the agents whose actions are causing changes in the landscape. In this case, a stamp tax associated with the purchase and transfer of landownership may be seen as an appropriate way of raising

funds for land conservation, because the actors are compelled to offer mitigation for their actions. Research has also found that voters often prefer the use of bonds to raise funds for land conservation (Kotchen and Powers 2006). Bonds help generate funds more quickly than a tax, and the costs of conservation can be delayed. People generally discount future costs, so voting yes on a bond measure may not been seen as a large expense.

Voter fatigue has also been found to have a negative impact on voter choices. Voters become fatigued when they attempt to assess all the tradeoffs associated with the decision or series of decisions (Stadelmann and Torgler, 2013). Longer ballot statements often contain more information, but this may or may not help inform their choices. In some cases, the longer ballot statement contains technical and legal jargon that is unclear to some voters and they may ignore or reject the measure rather than approve it. Research has found that the likelihood of a yes vote often increases as the number of words used in the ballot statement decreases (Kreye et al., 2019).

Concluding Remarks

Public demand for the protection of undeveloped lands will likely increase in the future, especially in areas experiencing rapid population growth (Kreye et al., 2014). While a shorter ballot statement may encourage a yes vote, this approach may be problematic if it gives decision-makers license to disseminate accrued conservation funds as they see fit. In this case, the ballot statement should reference a more complete description of the conservation measure that contains the language needed so the accrued funds are used for their intended purpose.

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