

How details given on ballot papers affect the outcomes of local and regional elections

SEPTEMBER 2014

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The success of a given candidate in an election can be affected by ostensibly unimportant factors, such as the details presented on the ballot papers. Since looking up information about the candidates and choosing between them takes time and effort, which not all voters are willing to put in, a large number of them when it comes to the election decide according to what they see on the ballot paper. Empirical research into this phenomenon based on data about individual candidates made available by the Czech Statistical Office was recently published in an article by Jurajda and Münich (2014)¹ and this IDEA study offers a brief summary of it.

Voters make their decision based on three types of information. First comes the information about the candidates' views, promises and capabilities, which the voters gather prior to the election. The second type of information about the candidates is what they find on the ballot paper: their gender, age, academic titles and profession; these characteristics may be related to the opinions and capabilities of the candidates. A third type of information is found in the so-called *electoral indicators*, for example the candidate's name, or the order in which the candidates' names are presented on the slate, which affects the 'visibility' of the given candidate. These indicators may not tell the voter anything about the quality of the individual candidates, but nevertheless serve as a subconscious nudge, facilitating decision-making for the less informed voter. This is particularly significant when there are many candidates, or when the candidates are not very well known to the voters. In our analysis we compare the

¹ Jurajda, Š. and Münich, D. (2014). Candidate ballot information and election outcomes: the Czech case, *Post-Soviet Affairs*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.949066>
This research was supported by the Karel Janeček Endowment Fund (Nadační fond Karla Janečka).

influence of ballot paper details and *electoral indicators* on voters' behaviour in the Czech regional elections in 2008 with their influence on the 2010 local elections, in which voters would often have known the candidates personally.

We begin our analysis by tracking the effect voter characteristics have on their placement on the slate, notably on whether they are placed among the 'electable' candidates.² We then examine the influence that ballot paper details have on preferential votes and on the outcome of the election, i.e. successfully gaining a mandate. Placement among the 'electable' candidates is key for the eventual success of a given candidate in the election, because current electoral rules mean that preferential votes are relatively insignificant. Only 17 % of mandates gained in the local elections in 2010 were gained as a result of preferential votes for candidates who were not in the 'electable' positions on the slate. In the regional elections this proportion was just 2 %.

As we show in our analysis, as a candidate grows older, he or she is more likely to be placed among the 'electable' candidates. Fifty-year-old candidates are the most successful in reaching these positions; after this age the likelihood of being placed in a top position on the slate gradually declines once more.

Furthermore, we demonstrate that women have a significantly lower chance of being placed in one of the electable positions on the slate than men with comparable characteristics (as shown on the ballot paper). A female candidate is 6 to 9% less likely to be listed in an 'electable' position than an equivalent male candidate. This difference between the genders is greater in the regional elections than in the local ones. Despite this, there is little difference in the number of preferential votes given to men and women, if we compare men and women in the same position on the slate and with the same educational qualifications and other details provided on the ballot paper. It is also noticeable that a male candidate listed next to a female candidate on the slate receives fewer preferential votes than a male candidate listed in the same position but next to other male candidates. In larger cities, this positioning statistically significantly affects the male candidate's chances of gaining a mandate. Academic titles increase the likelihood of a candidate being placed in an 'electable' position on the slate, by as much as tens of percentage points. Interestingly, lawyers are more likely to be placed in an 'electable' position than doctors, although doctors receive a higher number of preferential votes than lawyers. Academic titles have the greatest influence on the outcome of the election in smaller constituencies.

A Romany-sounding name has a strongly negative influence on the placement of the given candidate among the 'electable' positions on the slate in both local and regional elections. Such a name reduces the candidate's chance of being among 'electable' candidates by around 10% and also affects preferential votes.

Curiously enough, in small municipalities the alphabetical position of a candidate's surname has a statistically significant impact on that candidate's likelihood to be placed in an 'electable' position on the slate. Candidates whose surname begins with "Z" have on average a 1.5% lower chance of being placed in an 'electable' position compared with a candidate whose surname begins with "A". This could be a result of

² If on a given candidate list, 5 candidates win a mandate, we consider the first five candidates listed to be in 'electable' positions, even though the five candidates who are actually elected to office could, as a result of preferential votes, include candidates whose names were listed lower down the ballot paper in 'non-electable' positions (and not include all five 'electable' candidates).

the fact that candidates are, to begin with, listed in alphabetical order, and the electoral group or political party in question then rearranges the list according to the qualities of each individual candidate, but not thoroughly, so the alphabetical order is very often partly retained in the final arrangement.

A slate's position on randomly ordered ballot papers has a relatively great effect on the number of mandates gained. For example, in larger cities the first slate to be listed on the ballot paper gains a greater share of the council seats by between 2 and 4 %. In regional elections, being randomly placed second or third on the ballot paper also helps. This effect was not observed in small municipalities, however. This is in line with the assumption that in smaller and more local votes the voters are better informed about the candidates standing for election and are less affected by random factors.

References

Jurajda, Š. and München, D. (2014). Candidate ballot information and election outcomes: the Czech case, *Post-Soviet Affairs*.
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