

**DOES WHERE YOU VOTE MATTER?**  
**POLLING LOCATION PRIMING FOR STATE BALLOT**  
**ISSUES**

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Voters are primed in numerous ways throughout the campaign. This priming connects a candidate, party or policy, to criteria used to evaluate the candidate, party or policy. While the research on priming typically focuses on advertising and the media, we examine the extent to which polling location primes voters and affects the outcome of three state questions in the 2004 Oklahoma elections. Using state questions related to forming a lottery system to fund education and a state question to ban same-sex marriage, we find voters are primed when voting at schools when the state question concerns education; however voting at a church does not provide a signal for those voting on the issue of same-sex marriage. Overall differences do exist in support of these issues based on polling locations and we argue that polling location does have the potential to prime voters.

**In 1991 Frank Otero**, an atheist running for mayor of Miami, Oklahoma brought suit against Oklahoma challenging the use of churches as polling places (*Otero v. State Election Board of Oklahoma* 975 F.2d 738 (Sept. 1992)). Otero argued that the use of churches as polling places harmed his campaign by increasing the chance that voters will think about religion when voting. A year later, in Florida, Jerry Rabinowitz filed suit because in the church where he voted there were “pro-life” banners, and various religious symbols and sayings which he felt could bias voters' choices (*Rabinowitz v. Anderson* Case No. 06-81117 Civ.). In both cases, the courts failed to find evidence that voting at churches taints elections.

This paper examines whether voting locations, including churches, affect how voters cast their votes. Understanding whether voting in churches specifically, or voting locations generally affect elections is critical to insuring free and fair elections – a critical part of democracy. If outcomes can be affected by where people vote, it is likely that political operatives in this highly partisan era will manipulate voting locations. Additionally, although there is ample literature suggesting that voters can be primed, there is only a burgeoning body of literature examining how voting location can prime voters (Berger et al., 2008; Rutchick, 2010; Blumenthal and Turnipseed, 2011). Thus, this article contributes to a fuller understanding of priming.

To examine the priming effects of voting location we examine election results of three of the nine ballot items in the Oklahoma 2004 general election. The three ballot amendments were selected based on their respective associations to particular voting locations. From the nine amendments on the ballot that year, we distinguish these as the most salient and conceive that they are the best predictors of whether polling places prime the vote. One of the ballot items was State Question 711, which sought to define marriage as between one man and one woman and prohibits marriage benefits to same-sex couples. If voting location primes voters, we would expect those voting in churches to be more supportive of SQ 711. Although most voters going into a church are unlikely to be a member of that church or even that denomination, they are likely to associate religion with anti-same-sex marriage sentiment. Religiosity generally as well as conservative faiths (conceptualized in a variety of ways) are among the strongest predictors of American's views on same-sex marriage, the religious orientation of states/localities

is a strong predictor of an area's laws concerning gays and lesbians, and religious groups have been among the strongest opponents of gay rights (Olson, Cadge and Harrison, 2006; Wald, Button and Rienzo, 1996).<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that we are not arguing that the effects of voting in a church will always be conservative, there are certainly issues, places and times where religion is associated with liberal causes. But on this issue, time and place, we believe that voting in churches will have this particular effect. This does not however weaken the key concern that voting location can prime voters and affect the outcome of elections.

The other two items Amendments 705 and 706 concerned the creation of a state lottery to help fund schools. Since the pro-amendment campaign focused on funding schools, we expect that those voting in schools to be more supportive of the items. Although the amendments' proponents focused on education, the opponents made moral based arguments— essentially anti-gambling and crime. Thus we would expect those voting in churches to oppose the items since they would have the moral aspects primed and those voting in schools to favor the amendments since they would have the education aspects of the amendment primed.

It should be noted too that our expectation would be supported by the little research on of the priming effects of polling places. That is, studies indicate voters are more likely to vote in a conservative way when doing so in a church, while voters are more likely to support pro-education measures when voting in school buildings (Berger et al., 2008; Rutchick, 2010; Blumenthal and Turnipseed, 2011). No study yet, has found contradictory conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> It is true that some liberal faiths have taken stances in support of gay and lesbian marriage and rights, However, voters are less likely to be aware of the marriage views of the particular faith of the church they are voting in than they are to associate religion with the anti same-sex marriage agenda. It is likely that individual's faith has a greater effect on voting than the faith/denomination of the religion. Rutchik (2010) did find that non-Christians were less likely to be affected by Christian symbols than Christians. Thus the views of the church in which one is voting may be less important than the simply likelihood that voting in a church will increase the role that one's religion plays.

### PRIMING AND POLLING LOCATIONS

The main mechanism through which polling location can affect the vote is through priming. Priming is a non-conscious type of memory based on the identification of objects and ideas (Tulving and Schacter, 1990). It involves “manipulations” of external stimuli to activate internal thoughts, feelings or behavior (Bargh and Chartrand, 2000). In essence then, priming occurs when people get a stimulus that influences what they think about. In this case, voting locations may stimulate certain memories and get them to think certain things, such as voting in a school gets them to think about education. Research on priming is vast and broad, including topics such as language (Leonard, 2011), advertising (Yi, 1990), shopping habits (North, Hargreaves and McKendrick, 1997) and stereotypes (Graham and Lowery, 2004).

One mechanism through which priming occurs is through the uses of heuristics or cognitive shortcuts. Heuristics are used to simplify the vote choice for the average voter, and although heuristics are not identical to priming, priming can use heuristics to affect vote choice. For example, voting in a church instead of a community building could bring up religious heuristics to voters instead of civil rights or partisan heuristics. The heuristics, as simplifications, can prime a voter to evaluate the candidate or policy in a particular way because through the use of the heuristics the voter is not gathering and evaluating the full range of information available. The connection between priming and heuristics used as cognitive short cuts to simplify decision-making has been clearly demonstrated to influence decision-making (Bargh, Chen and Burrows, 1996). Common heuristics that have been found to serve as cues to voters include: a candidate's party identification, economic status, education levels, and religious convictions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Downs, 1957; Converse, 1964; Nie et al., 1976; Dalton and Wattenberg, 1993). Even going back to *The American Voter*, party identification has been found to shape a person's view of the political world and eventually shape voting preferences (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960). Literature demonstrates that the presence of party cues (or lack of) can manipulate a political choice (Kam, 2007). Kam (2007) found the presence of a party cue decreased the likelihood of supporting a candidate based solely on ethnic preference.

Because voters and the general public are cognitive misers, it makes sense that short cuts are employed in making decisions. Priming is a subset of this when the short-cut is the connection between an object and the evaluation being made. Priming has been shown in reference to partisan evaluations of Congress (Kimball, 2005) and presidential approval numbers (Druckman and Holmes, 2004). For example, presidential rhetoric is a priming device for approval ratings, by priming the actual issues (the object) that bring about approval consideration (the evaluation). This happens by focusing on issues that are advantageous to a President and as a result, shape how approval is formed (Druckman and Holmes, 2004). If voters and the public were to carefully consider all of the information available, priming most likely would not occur. Instead the public would focus on the full content of the presidential speech and evaluate the president accordingly.

In addition, religion has been shown to have a priming effect on social concepts and issues (Johnson, Rowaat and LaBouff, 2010). Johnson, et. al. (2010) found individuals primed with Christian concepts had a small, but significant, increase in racial prejudice towards African Americans. This evidence has illustrated that there is a correlation between religion and specific views on social ideas and concepts (Johnson, Rowaat and LaBouff, 2010). All of these determinants are useful heuristics that simplify the vote choice for voters with low information and provide a mechanism for priming. Rational voters seek our short-cuts to decision making and these short-cuts allow for priming depending on the type of heuristic employed.

Though most often examined through the lens of media effects and voting, priming is seen as a way to call attention to some issues, and not others, and through this, the standards by which the issues are evaluated are affected (Iyengar and Kinder, 1989). For example, Iyengar and Kinder (1989) used experimental studies to show that increased television coverage of defense, energy and inflation, primed subjects' evaluations of the president according to these issues. Their results showed that viewers exposed to news stories with coverage of these issues evaluated the president's performance based on these issues. The priming occurred through the media's connection of these issues to the president, thereby altering the evaluation of the president.

Priming also occurs during an election through the content of the campaign. Research indicates that the content of a U.S. Senate campaign primes the reasoning behind voters' decisions at the polls (Druckman, 2004). Priming ballot issue through campaigning takes place because the issues are at "the top of the head" (Mendelsohn, 1996). The potential for voters to be primed by all external stimuli is there, but they can only be primed if they have *a posteriori* knowledge of stimuli. Priming is dependent on past memory of external stimuli, thus the cause must be present mentality before a "primed" effect can take place. Most American voters have at least some experience with both religion and education, thus schools and churches are likely have some memories that can be conjured up. Also given that the campaigning on these items discussed religion and education, voters should have specific memories about these institutions' positions on the items.

Given that priming occurs throughout campaigns, by the campaigns themselves, candidates, elected officials and the media, it makes sense that polling location might provide additional cues to the voter that prime the voter with respect to certain issues. While going to a school to vote might not signal which candidate best supports education, the school location might affect the degree to which voters think about education in casting their votes. The research of Berger et al. (2008) found this to be true. Using data from the 15 counties in Arizona and 2027 precincts during Arizona's 2000 general election, Berger et al. (2008) demonstrated priming effects of polling locations. Within Arizona the precinct distribution ranged from 40 % in churches, 26 % held in schools, 10 % held in community centers, 4 % held in apartment complexes and 4 % held in government buildings (Berger et al., 2008). The results showed that the people who voted in schools were significantly<sup>2</sup> more likely to support Proposition 301, which proposed increasing the state sales tax rates to finance an increase in spending on education, compared to voters who voted in other buildings (Berger et al., 2008). The exact percentage was 56.02 % of people who voted in schools, compared to 53.99 % who did not vote in schools. At first glance this does not appear to be a grave difference,

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship was significant at the .01 level even after control for several factors such as demographic characteristics. The authors ran several tests using several statistics including linear regression and logit.

however, during close elections it could make the difference between an item or candidate winning or losing.

In addition to these findings, they also did a voting experiment to further develop their findings. The researchers would randomly show participants<sup>3</sup> in the study pictures of a school, church, or a control picture. They would then ask the participants to “vote” on a list of ballot initiatives. First, the participants were told that the research interest was in the relationship between personality and perception (Berger et al., 2006). Ten of the 15 pictures of the churches and schools were taken from buildings that were taken care of properly. The pictures related to schools and churches consisted of lockers, classrooms, pews, and altar. The remaining five pictures of random “community buildings” were used as dummy variables. At this point, the participants “voted” on a number of state initiatives that included a stem cell funding initiative from California and an Arizona’s education tax initiative. The authors found that environmental cues influenced voting behavior on both counts. Participants were less likely to support the stem cell initiative if they were primed with the images of a church (Berger et al., 2006).

More recently, Rutchik’s (2010) examination of South Carolina’s 2004 and 2006 elections also found that voters voting in churches were more conservative. The results show that those who voted in a church were more likely to support the conservative candidate Gary McLeod in 2004 and less likely to support gay rights on two state amendments in 2006. Rutchik (2010) also conducted experimental analyses similar to Berger et al. (2008) and the results confirm the election biased results. Overall, Rutchik (2010) concludes that there is an advantage to conservative candidates and conservative ballot issues in polling places that are churches. Although both Rutchik and Berger et al.’s field studies were conducted in the south (South Carolina and Arizona) Berger et al. supplemented their research with a random sample national study. This experimental study, discussed earlier, suggested that nationally voters voting in churches are likely to vote more conservatively than others. Even if the particular effect of voting in a church is contextual, voting in churches still has the effect of priming at

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<sup>3</sup> This study consisted of 50 people with a mean age of 34.

least some voters. The effects do not have to be universal for them to bias elections.

The consistencies between the research of Berger et al. (2008) and Rutchik (2010) raise concerns about the priming effects of where we vote. Interestingly enough, the initial two studies in this area were conducted apparently without awareness of each other's work in the field. As Berger et al. (2008) focused on the priming effects of school buildings, they speculated whether or not the same finding would hold in churches on stem cell or gay marriage issues. Likewise, as Rutchik (2010) researched priming effects of churches, he speculated whether similar conclusions would be found in voting in school building.

### **HYPOTHESES**

Drawing on the priming literature and the results of Berger et al. (2008) and Rutchik (2010), we pose two hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that voting in a church will lead to a greater percentage of Oklahoma voters to vote to ban same-sex marriage (SQ 711), compared to those who voted in a community building. Further, voting in a school building will lead to a greater percentage of Oklahoma voters to support education (State Questions 705 and 706) compared to voters who vote at other locations, particularly community buildings.

### **DATA AND METHODS**

To test our hypotheses we examine vote outcomes by polling location on three ballot items in the 2004 Oklahoma general election. One item is used to measure the vote for same-sex marriage, state question 711. This item would amend the state's constitution to "define marriage as being between one man and one woman; only married people are eligible for the benefits for married people; same-sex marriages from other states are not valid in Oklahoma; it would be a misdemeanor to issue a marriage license in Oklahoma; by adding Section 35 to Article 2." This measure passed with 76 % (1,075,216) in favor and 24 % (347,303) opposed. To measure support for education we used two ballot items concerning the creation of a lottery to support education, state question 705 and state question 706. State question 705 passed



with 64.7% in favor (928,442) and 35.3% opposed (507,077). State question 706 passed with 67.9% in favor (970,987) and 32.1% opposed (458,122). For each precinct we calculated a percentage “yes” vote per precinct. These data came from the Oklahoma State Election Board. The data were coded by county and precinct.<sup>4</sup> In calculating the vote by county we removed absentee ballot votes since these voters did not vote at the assigned location.

Our main independent variables are polling locations. To measure polling location we create four dummy variables: one for church, one for school, one for community building and the last for other location. Churches and schools are clear categories but community buildings include such things as fire departments, community centers, community halls, town halls, public libraries, and nursing homes. For each a one represents the precinct votes in that location, a zero otherwise. Overall, voters in 47.82% of the precincts vote in churches, 12.13% in schools, 23.28% in community buildings and 16.55% in miscellaneous other locations.

## RESULTS

Our first test of the data is a difference of means test. This test compares the means of two groups. For each state question we compared the means of the polling location of interest (church for SQ 711 and school for SQ 705 and SQ 706) to voters who voted in community buildings. The results of these tests are presented in Table 1.

The difference of means test show significant and meaningful differences exist between those who voted at schools and supported

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<sup>4</sup> To get the information, election board officials in each of the 77 counties were contacted to obtain a list of the polling locations from 2004. The only county that was unable to produce this information was Oklahoma County, so for this county, we used their 2010 list of precinct location. In speaking with officials from the Oklahoma County Election Board, they noted that they have switched around some of their polling places, but they indicated that the current list was a good representation of the polling locations they had during the 2004 General Election. Even though the polling places may have shifted a small amount, the precinct numbers remained the same. Therefore, the coding of the current precinct places matched perfectly with the precincts results that came from 2004.

Table 1  
 Difference of Means Test Between Precinct Voting Location and State Question Support

	SQ 705		SQ 706		SQ 711	
	School	Community Building	School	Community Building	Church	Community Building
Mean	64.10	63.11	66.87	65.62	75.32	79.47
Difference	0.99		1.25		-4.15	
Hypothesized Mean	Diff>0		Diff>0		Diff>0	
t-value	1.59		2.09		-8.98	
p-value	0.06		0.02		1.00	
N	257	496	257	496	1015	496

SQ 705 and SQ 706 compared to those who voted at community buildings. Specifically, the mean difference between those who voted at a school and those who voted at a community building was about 1% for both state measures. While this provides support for our hypothesis, our hypothesis is not supported when we look at the mean differences between support for SQ 711 and those who voted at churches compared to those who voted at community buildings. The t-test indicates no significant difference.

Building on the difference of means test, and following Berger et al. (2008) we ran a regression on the percentage of ‘yes’ votes as the dependent variables in three separate models and three of the four dummy variables for voting locations as the main independent variables (community buildings is the comparison dummy variable).<sup>5</sup> Therefore we use church, school and miscellaneous for the regression models. Since support for SQ 711 indicates a conservative position, we expect a positive coefficient for the dummy variable of church voting. Similarly, since support for SQ 705 and SQ 706 indicate support for education, we expect positive coefficients for the dummy variable school voting for these analyses.

We also include variables to control for general ideology of the precincts. Since precinct measures of ideology are difficult to obtain we use the percentage of vote received by President George W. Bush in each precinct. The mean of the percentage of Bush votes across precincts is 64.18% with a standard deviation of 13.84%.<sup>6</sup> The results of the regression analyses can be found in Table 2.

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<sup>5</sup> Given the dependent variables are percentages we also conducted the analysis using a generalized linear model. We found no differences between a simple regression and GLM, so we opted for the simple regression for our analyses.

<sup>6</sup> We considered using straight ticket Republican voting as a sign of conservative ideology as well. But it was highly correlated to vote for Bush and resulted in weaker findings. We were also prevented from including other control variables that might be of interest such as religion, and education levels since these data are not available at the precinct level.

Table 2  
Effects of Polling Location on Support for State Ballot Issues

	Question 705	Question 706	Question 711
Percent Bush vote	-0.26*** (0.01)	-0.17*** (0.01)	0.33*** (0.01)
Church	1.73*** (0.39)	2.28*** (0.39)	-4.32*** (0.39)
School	0.94+ (0.54)	1.27* (0.54)	-3.49*** (0.55)
Miscellaneous	-1.68** (0.49)	2.07*** (0.49)	-2.70*** (0.50)
Constant	79.59 (0.78)	76.61 (0.78)	58.23 (0.80)
N	2124	2124	2123
R <sup>2</sup> , F, prob>F	0.21, 137.05, 0.00	0.11, 67.57, 0.00	0.31, 238.97, 0.00

Note: regression analyses used.

Question 711: percentage of “yes” votes for state question 711.

Question 705: percentage of “yes” votes for state question 705.

Question 706: percentage of “yes” votes for state question 706.

Starting with SQ 705 and SQ 706, we find support for our hypothesis. People who vote at schools are more likely to support education measures compared to those who vote at community buildings. This difference was almost 1% for SQ 705 and over 1 and a quarter percent for SQ 706. However, our hypothesis is not supported when we look at SQ 711. Here we find that people who vote at churches are less likely support a same-sex marriage ban than those who vote at community buildings. There is a nearly 4% difference.

One possible reason for the counterintuitive finding is that moderate voters who cast votes in churches may have been put off by the religious rights' role in the debates and voting in churches reminded them of this. It could also be that the models were underspecified and with other controls the hypothesis would have been better supported.

Further, part of the reason for the unexpected findings could be that there was little variation (the item passed with 76% of the vote). After all Berger et al. 2008 focused on an issue that did not pass with the great rate as the ban on same-sex marriage did in Oklahoma, nor with even as high of rates as the lottery questions. The proposal they researched passed with a rate of 53% in favor. But the lack of variation would have been more likely to produce insignificant coefficients and not significant coefficients in the opposite direction.

In terms of our controls, we found a few additional effects worth mentioning. First, unexpectedly, for the education measures, those who voted in churches compared to community buildings were also more likely to support these measures. And those who voted in schools and miscellaneous locations were also less likely to support the ban on same-sex marriage compared to those who voted in community buildings. Lastly, we found percent Bush vote to have a positive effect on support for SQ 711 and a negative effect on support for education measures. The former follows the expected direction, while the latter we would not have predicted necessarily any effect, positive or negative. We believe the negative effect might be explained by the context of the measures themselves. Although the lottery issue was framed as an education bill, the issue also involves gambling and it is likely that Bush supporters opposed the lottery more because of anti-gambling sentiment than anti-education.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall we did find support for our hypotheses when we examined education measure and voting in schools, but not when we examined gay marriage and voting at a church.. Thus the priming effects of voting location may be more nuanced than previous research suggests. A potential concern of our analysis might be that our findings create an ecological fallacy. The ecological fallacy is, in the context of statistical analysis, “the assumption that something learned about an ecological unit says something about the individuals making up that unit” (Babbie, 2002). This unit of analysis is susceptible to fallacy in that it makes generalizations regarding particulars, based on the findings of an aggregated data. For instance, it could be argued that certain cities with

higher crime rates could blame it on having higher percentages of a particular race, without knowing the statistics of who was responsible for the particular crimes. However, here the item of interest is voting location, which is shared by everyone in the precinct; even absentee ballots were not included in the data. Thus, we are not making false generalizations regarding particular voters since the only generalizations are based on the voting location, and we have been able to attain 100 % of the data from that location.

Although we did not find support for our hypothesis related to SQ 711, we were able to demonstrate a strong level of relationship between those voters who voted for Bush and for those voters who voted to ban same-sex marriage. This finding confirms the belief that was widely held in 2004 and extended the literature with shows this direct relationship. Additional studies on the relationship between voting places and relationships between candidates and issues are an ongoing field that has a future that will be developed more thoroughly.

These results have some practical implications. First as Blumenthal and Turnipseed (2011) argue in light of the recent discoveries about the priming effects of voting locations, the courts have *wrongly* held in favor of allowing the use of churches as polling places. Since there is now evidence that location affects votes the Courts need to revisit the issue of bias. Second, our research indicates that any voting location can have the potential to bias elections and it is not easy to predict how. Thus ideally we should get rid of requiring specific polling places. Again, this view is supported by Blumenthal and Turnipseed (2011). They point to both Oregon, where voters have been casting their ballots through the mail since 1998, and Washington State where in most counties, voting is done through the mail. They argue that mail-in voting eliminates discrimination and bias by poll-workers (Blumenthal and Turnipseed, 2011). The argument is made that having a ballot mailed to you at home acts as both a reminder and initiative to develop a more informed decision about the candidates and issues on the ballot. It is hoped that in return this will yield a process that leads to more informed voting decisions (Blumenthal and Turnipseed, 2011). Of course, voters who mail in their ballots are still doing this at a location that could prime certain types of votes. However, the state would not be determining the location.

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