

That's the Ticket? Straight Ticket Voting in State Legislative Elections

Brandon Rottinghaus
University of Houston

Abstract

Straight ticket voting (sometimes called straight party voting) allows voters to select all candidates from a single party for all contests on the ballot. Voters split their tickets consistently from the 1950s to the 2000s, yet a wave of political polarization beginning in the 2000s increased the frequency of straight ticket voting as a convenience for party-driven voters. Recent trends in state voting laws have moved away from allowing voters to vote straight ticket as several states have abolished the practice. This article tests the effect on turnout overall and for both parties when a state removes the straight ticket voting in state legislative elections. The loss of straight ticket voting affects both parties by reducing overall vote share but affects Democratic house candidates more who typically benefitted from the availability of straight ticket voting. Implications of these changes in ballots mean more divided government and a lessened incumbency advantage in state legislatures.

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Straight ticket voting (sometimes called straight party voting (STV)) allows voters to vote for all candidates of one party for all contests on the ballot. Political trends and ballot design dictate whether voters use this option or not. Voters split their tickets consistently from the 1950s to the 2000s, caused in part by absence of competitive congressional races in the United States, leading to a wave of divided government (Burden and Kimball 2004). Such trends were caused by either a desire for “policy balancing” or local, short-term electoral forces (although there is debate about why voters split their tickets (see Garand and Lichtl 2000)). Yet, a wave of political polarization beginning in the 2000s and continuing through today increased the frequency of straight ticket voting as a convenience for party-supporting voters (Sievert and McKee 2019). The correlation between party identification and ideology intensified in this period, leading more voters to choose the straight ticket option (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Knight and Erikson 1997; Levine, Carmines, and Huckfeldt 1997; Baufumi and Shaprio 2000; Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

Recent trends in state voting laws, however, have moved away from allowing voters to vote straight ticket (Jacobson 2016) because many critics view it as a top-down scenario where voters deliberately choose partisan outcomes at the top of the ticket but blindly choose the same partisan outcome with little reference or understanding of how that party-aligned choice affects down ballot races. Indeed, in the last decade, West Virginia, South Dakota, Rhode Island, North Carolina, and Texas have abolished STV as an option. The argument against STV is that the ballot design encourages only reflexive partisan behavior, nationalizing elections and widening the partisan divisions in American politics (Jacobson 2015). Several studies have documented that voter roll off (voters selecting in races at the top of the ticket but not down ballot) in judicial elections (Chertoff and Robinson 2012;

Bonneau and Loepp 2014; Burnett and Tiede 2015; Kritzer 2016), and ballot measures (Feig 2009). Similar work demonstrates that white voters are more likely than African Americans to roll off down ballot (Feig 2007).

Yet we know little about the effect of the transition in states that move to disallow STV in general and the specific effect in low information but partisan races in the middle of the ballot. This article tests the effect on turnout when a state removes the straight ticket voting option from the ballot in state legislative elections. In this article we address the following questions: What effect does removing STV as an option have on (1) voter turnout overall and (2) support for candidates of each of the major political parties? Most research on straight ticket voting focuses on individual voting behavior motivation or judicial elections – few examine turnout by party when states shift from allowing straight ticket to banning the practice and few look to state legislative races (a midway point between the partisan top of the ballot and the non-partisan down ballot). Looking at only certain elections (like only gubernatorial or presidential) may amplify the effect of STV, making examining a longer time span and inclusive of all elections an important addition to the literature.

Causes of Split and Straight Ticket Voting

As the “cost” of voting increases, especially the time and effort it takes to vote (even while in the voting booth), the likelihood of turnout may decrease (Downs 1957). Election reforms involving convenience voting have a greater impact on otherwise lower turnout elections such as down ballot, local elections (Magleby 1987, Karp and Banducci 2000, Kousser and Mullin 2007). Ballot design, including allowing voters to vote for all party candidates with one vote, has had a significant impact on voter attention to races at the

bottom of the ticket (Kropf and Kimball 2012). The impacts of the removal of STV on voter behavior are potentially significant. For instance, longer wait times are associated with a lower likelihood of voting (Stewart 2013) and the removal of the STV option may increase the time it takes for voters to complete a ballot. Without partisan labels as a guide, voters may be less likely to participate in certain contests.

Why do voters vote straight ticket or split their tickets? Voters who possess stronger party identification, voters with high motivation, and voters with more knowledge about candidates are more likely to choose the straight ticket voting option (Campbell and Miller 1957; Beck, Baum, Clausen, and Smith 1992). Likewise, partisan leaning voters eventually support fellow party candidates at election time (Gelman and King 1992). Straight ticket voting allows voters to easily accomplish this mapping of their preferences onto the candidates of the party they prefer. Relatedly, voters may be choosing to *split* their tickets on purpose to balance political power across the institutions by dividing power and balancing policy outcomes (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2004; Saunders, Abramowitz, and Williamson 2005) and out of a desire for moderate policy outputs (Fiorina 1992a, 1992b but see Mebane 2000). On the other hand, scholars argue this is not intentional but rather a by-product of lopsided congressional campaigns (Burden and Kimball 1998). Split ticket voting may also be related to partisan indifference where voters see no strong differences between the parties (Mulligan 2011; Davis 2015). This may be less likely in more polarized times.

Expectations

Two expectations are explored in relation to when states retain (or remove) the option for voters to vote straight ticket:

Straight ticket voting is easier than voting in each individual contest which may run into the dozens of races from the top to the bottom of the ballot. Partisan cues are easier to map onto preferences when straight ticket voting allows for voters to vote for all or most candidates of their preferred party on the ballot. Undervoting (stopping voting before a voters' ballot is complete) is likely intentional, resulting from a voter's intent to skip a particular electoral contests – therefore, the availability of STV is a factor in the roll off of voters at a certain electoral race (Campbell and Miller 1957; Niemi and Herrnson 2003). Straight ticket voting reduces the number of unrecorded votes for offices, so eliminating the STV option should increase down ballot roll off (Bullock and Dunn 1996). Kropf and Kimball (2012) find that residual votes (number of ballots cast in a county that fail to record a valid vote for a particular contest) are minimized when localities allow straight ticket voting. Ballot “errors” are minimized when straight ticket voting is an option, suggesting lower turnout when straight ticket voting is not an option (Herrnson, Hanmer, and Neimi 2012). Put differently, voters vote in more contests down ballot when straight ticket voting is allowed. If the option is taken away, voters are less likely to vote in contests lower down on the ballot.

Expectation 1: *Elimination of straight ticket voting will reduce vote totals in state legislative elections.*

Straight ticket voting allows for more voters to participate easily and quickly, as outlined in Expectation 1, but when it is allowed (or removed), which party benefits? Conventional wisdom is that straight ticket voting helps elect Democrats down ballot

(Oosting and LeBlanc 2018). Journalistic accounts suggest straight ticket voting is helping Democrats win more legislative seats. For instance, in 2016, straight ticket voting was the choice of about 64% of voters in Texas' ten largest counties (Kelley 2018), reaching record levels of straight ticket voting (Young 2019), leading the way for flipping suburban state and federal legislative seats to the Democrats. Republican candidates in several down ballot partisan races pointed to a spike in Democratic straight ticket voting as the cause of close losses in large urban counties (Platoff 2018). Scholars have shown Democratic constituencies are more likely to vote straight ticket than other groups (Feig 2007). Studies from selected elections show that Democrats are advantaged more than Republicans by straight party voting in vote share (Kimball, Owens and McLaughlin 2002).

Expectation 2: *Elimination of straight ticket voting will reduce the vote share for both parties but will reduce the vote share for Democratic candidates more than for Republican candidates in state legislative elections.*

Empirical Strategy and Method

We begin with a database of state legislative election returns for all states from 2006 to 2016 compiled by Klarner (2018). The unit of analysis is the individual state legislative district (both upper and lower chamber) for both states that allowed and those that did not allow straight ticket voting. State legislative races are instructive for analyzing the roll off rate due to the elimination of straight ticket voting because these are often the first contests where voters become significantly less familiar with candidate options without party as a guide – these contests are located far enough down on the ballot where voters may know or

care about the election but not so far down as to be obscure to voters, such as municipal or judicial offices. Indeed, candidate visibility is key to explaining the difference between straight and split ticket voting (Beck, Baum, Clausen, and Smith 1992). Focusing on state legislative seats is also novel. Scholars have examined the impact of straight ticket voting judicial elections (Chertoff and Robinson 2012; Shortell 2013; Bonneau and Loepp 2014; Kritzer 2016), ballot measures (Feig 2009), gubernatorial elections (Kropf and Kimball 2012), or presidential elections (Kimball, Owens, and McLaughlin 2002), but this is the first cross sectional study to examine the impact of straight ticket voting on legislative seats.

To construct a measure of the availability (or not) of straight ticket voting as an option for voters, a dummy variable was created to determine if a state in a given year allowed straight ticket voting (“1”) or not (“0”) as determined by the National Conference of State Legislatures and searches of state constitutions or state electoral codes.¹ Several covariates were included for control purposes (each dummy variables with “1” coded as affirmative): **incumbent** status to capture the competitiveness of the race and a variable indicating **presidential election** with the assumption that turnout is higher in presidential election years than midterm election years.

The models below estimate a panel model with fixed effects for states and clustered errors at the state level. Because competitive elections are unevenly distributed across states and years, removal of these contests leads to an unbalanced panel. Likewise, New Jersey and Mississippi’s elections to the House of Representatives and State Senate occur in odd years not lined up with presidential elections unlike most states, creating additional panel imbalance issues. Likewise, Alabama’s elections are in only midterm years (both House and Senate members serve four year terms). The dependent variable is vote totals overall

and for each of the two major party candidates. The analysis examines only general election results (no primaries, special elections, or runoffs) and excludes cases where there was not a Republican and Democrat running for the office. For instance, Virginia's elections to the State Senate and the House of Delegates are elected in odd numbered years but certain special elections may be held in presidential years. The models exclude cases where the vote total was greater than 100 votes for a candidate, providing the inclusion of only competitive races. The data are also divided by chamber with the expectation that larger districts in the upper chamber with more voters will be more affected by changes in voting processes.

Findings

Table 1 presents the results of the estimated panel OLS models with vote totals as the dependent variable. The loss of straight ticket voting as an option affects both parties. Candidates can expect about 3,355 more votes when straight ticket voting is an option (or 3,355 fewer votes if it is not an option), as expected. The effect is small but substantive across all 50 states over the time period examined. Tighter linkages between top and bottom of ticket races lead to more partisan use of the straight ticket vote (Sievert and McKee 2019). In the end, "partisans still are partisans" and it is relatively easy to vote for all the candidates of one party, even without the option to punch a single button to do so (Jacobson 2010). Vote share is higher for candidates in the lower chamber (house) than for candidates in the upper chamber, yielding about 3,000 more votes (or 3,000 fewer votes when straight ticket voting is eliminated). There is no statistically significant effect for straight ticket voting in the upper chamber (figures not shown).

Consistent with Kropf and Kimball's (2012) finding that the undervote is less large in presidential elections, the elimination of the straight ticket voting option has a larger effect on vote share in presidential elections than other elections. Specifically, the vote totals are higher in presidential election years with the availability of straight ticket voting than in other election years, losing 11,277 votes overall in state legislative races. For Democrats, removing the STV option decreases vote totals by about 5,000 votes in presidential years overall and up to 12,000 in state senate races in presidential election years. Top of the ticket presidential politics drives much of the vote choice in presidential election years with straight ticket voting facilitating more party-aligned voting. Incumbents typically benefit from straight ticket voting, primarily Democrats: current office holders can count on about 2,000 votes due to straight ticket voting (about 5,000 in contests for the upper legislative chamber) primarily due to gerrymandered districts which consolidate partisans into likeminded districts. Republican incumbents fare less well, perhaps because of intraparty challenges to incumbents driven by ideological divides within the party in this period.

Table 1 – Effect of Straight Ticket Voting on Vote Share

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Total Votes	Democratic (House)	Republican (House)	Democratic (Senate)	Republican (Senate)
Straight Ticket	2,433.0** (1,095.0)	2,295.8*** (392.7)	1,066.1* (444.1)	1,357.3 (1314.4)	-1,919.9 (1424.0)
Incumbent	-1,969.8*** (120.9)	2,412.7*** (72.52)	-4,011.4*** (82.02)	4,732.8*** (256.2)	-7,924.4*** (277.6)
Presidential Year	11,277.3*** (345.1)	5,084.9*** (122.1)	3,566.3*** (138.1)	11,943.3*** (445.7)	9,321.0*** (482.9)
Constant	24,954.5*** (358.1)	9,364.6*** (130.8)	10,253.7*** (147.9)	20,589.7*** (404.5)	22,327.3*** (438.2)
N	20,558	16,053	16,053	4,505	4,505
R-sq	0.115	0.143	0.169	0.186	0.220
Groups (States)	50	50	50	50	50
Rho	.574	.759	.686	.791	.744
Pr(u _i =0) (Prob > F)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

NOTE: Dependent variable is total votes by party candidate. Standard errors (clustered) in parentheses, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

As identified in Expectation 2, candidates for both parties benefit from straight ticket voting (or lose vote share when it is eliminated) but the effect is stronger for Democratic candidates and house candidates, consistent with expectations. Model 2, for Democratic house seats, advantaged candidates with straight ticket voting by about 2,200 votes. The average Democratic candidate receives just over 10,500 votes in the time period examined, 14,600 for incumbents, making this figure substantively impactful. Put another way, the average difference between the Democratic and Republican candidate during the period for lower chamber races is 6,700 votes, so 2,200 votes would be more than 30% of that total. The effect for Republican house candidates (model 3) demonstrated a small advantage for Republicans of about 1,000 votes. The results from Table 1 also reveal that the straight

ticket advantage is non-existent in Senate races – the effect in models 4 and 5 is either not statistically significant, negative, or both. Candidates for the upper chamber may be better known than candidates for the lower chamber, especially because the geographic size is larger and the positions more visible. The period examined holds some of the explanation.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings in this paper demonstrate how straight ticket voting has solidified the ease of voting for many voters and drives the vote totals for many partisan candidates – removing the method as an option, as many states have done recently, will reduce vote share for both parties but especially for Democratic candidates for lower chamber legislative seats. One implication to these changes is that, if straight ticket voting leads to more unified government, the elimination of straight ticket voting will lead to more ticket splitting and therefore more divided government between the president and Congress, state legislatures and the president, and state legislatures and state governors (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). By nature, this will lead to an erosion of the incumbency advantage (see Jacobson 2015) as candidates can no longer count on an engineered reservoir of support from partisans in their districts. The effect will be most prominent for Democratic incumbents who stand to absorb the brunt of the electoral effect of the change. Between 2008 and 2018, Democrats lost upwards of 1,000 legislative seats (Malcolm 2019). Elimination of straight ticket voting may be one factor in dissolving incumbent Democratic advantages in these states. If and when these state legislative elections line up with presidential elections, the results show the effects are likely to be magnified.

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Endnotes

¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Straight Ticket Voting States." <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/straight-ticket-voting.aspx>, Accessed August 20, 2019.