

Older, Younger, or More Similar? The Use of Age as a Voting Heuristic*

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Abstract

Objective. The descriptive representation literature has found that individuals prefer to vote for candidates who share similar characteristics as themselves. However, the relationship between the age of a voter and the age of a candidate is a gap in the literature that remains to be filled. The objective of this study is to examine such relationships. *Methods.* Utilizing the 2010 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), along with independently collected information on candidates' ages, we use a series of logistic regressions to model the relationship between the age of a voter and the age of a co-partisan candidate. *Results.* Our analyses suggest that a candidate's age can and does act as a voting heuristic for members of the electorate. However, the strength of these findings is dependent upon the electoral context, individuals' education levels, and the political party with which an individual affiliates. *Conclusion.* The effect of age has been an overlooked heuristic within the voting behavior literature. Members of the electorate prefer to vote for co-partisan candidates who are closest to themselves in age.

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Responding to a moderator's question during a debate against Walter Mondale during the 1984 presidential election, Ronald Reagan famously quipped that he would "not exploit, for political purposes, [Mondale's] youth and inexperience." Though Reagan's quote has taken its place in the annals of famous political campaign quotes, the oft-overlooked question to which he was responding still has practical importance in contemporary American politics. Edwin Newman, the moderator of the debate that night, was asking Reagan whether he would be able to withstand the rigors of political office given his advanced age. This question was particularly poignant given that Mondale, at 56-years old, provided a strong juxtaposition in age with the septuagenarian Reagan. Likewise, in the 1992 presidential election Bill Clinton's age contrasted sharply with that of George H.W. Bush, who was 22 years Clinton's senior. Sixteen years later, the age of candidates once again played a role in American elections. In 2008, for instance, Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency engendered overwhelming turnout and support for the Democratic ticket among youth voters (Keeter, Horowitz and Tyson 2008). So great was the youth voter turnout for Obama that journalists across the country were claiming that this group comprised the "backbone" of the campaign and that they were a "major factor" in the 47-year old Obama's "decisive victory" over 72-year old John McCain (Falcone 2008).

The concern over candidates' ages does not appear to be limited to presidential elections. During the 2008 election cycle, New Jersey Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg received criticism about his age from Rob Andrews, his Republican challenger. Five years later, Lautenberg died at the age of 89 and was replaced in the Senate by 44-year old Cory Booker, the former mayor of Newark (Laurence 2013; Sullivan 2013).¹ In the 2014 election cycle, Texas

¹ It is rather ironic that Lautenberg himself voiced concerns over the age of his Republican challenger in first campaign for the Senate in 1982.

Congressman Ralph Hall also faced questions over whether, at 91 years of age, he would be able to adequately represent his constituents in Congress. As a result of these concerns, Hall, then the oldest member of the House of Representatives, was defeated in the Republican primary by a 48-year old former U.S. district attorney (DelReal 2014).

What role, then, does a candidate's age play in the decision-making process of voters? Answers from both journalistic and scholarly research tend to associate the effect of candidate age with the type of information it provides. Building on research of candidate attributes as a voting heuristic, these explanations describe age as conveying information about candidate traits to low-information voters (Caprara et al. 2007). Older candidates, according to age stereotypes, will be considered to be more experienced; younger candidates will be considered to be more energetic.

However, these accounts seem contradictory in explaining voting decisions. Sometimes voters prefer experience; sometimes voters prefer energy. Drawing on a separate vein of research on voting heuristics, we explain this conflict by returning to age as a cue for personal similarity. In line with this research, we argue that voters choose candidates that are most similar to them in terms of demographics, such as gender, race, or, in this case, age (see, e.g., McDermott 1997). Thus, a candidate's age is only an asset to that candidate inasmuch as their age makes them similar to the electorate. If voters are similar to a candidate in age, they should be more likely to vote for that candidate. Whether this preference for candidates of a similar age is due to the policy information it provides (as discussed above) or because age similarity acts as a cue that the candidate is someone the voter would like above and beyond their policy positions is an open question. While we do not adjudicate between them directly, our inclination is that voters are relying on both of these mechanisms to varying degrees. Our belief is that voters are primarily

relying on a candidate's age as a substitute for information, which we explain in greater detail below. However, we do not preclude the possibility that some voters may be relying on the heuristic of a candidate's age as a less-than-rational substitute for substantive information. That is, by examining the relationship between their own age and that of a candidate, voters are implicitly answering the famous "who would you rather have a beer with?" question.²

Additionally, while age may play a role in influencing voter behavior, this influence is not likely to be constant across all elections. The amount of information that a voter possesses has been shown to influence the degree to which voting cues are helpful (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). In investigating the use of age as a voting heuristic, we expand this finding to show how the influence of voting cues differs across informational contexts. Using an original data set on candidate ages combined with the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies from 2010 and 2012, we show how the effective use of age as a voting cue varies across gubernatorial and congressional elections in the United States. Our results suggest that age is a meaningful voting cue, and that voting cues are most helpful when voters possess the skills needed to cognitively access such heuristics.

This paper proceeds as follows: after providing background for intuitions about the use of age to make voting decisions, we provide foundations for a theory of age as a voting cue. Following the presentation of this theory, we describe different conditions under which this theory may be more or less operative. To test this theory, we next describe and interpret an analysis of voting in the 2010 and 2012 elections. Finally, we offer concluding remarks on the use of age as a voting heuristic.

² The "beer question" simply asks voters which candidate they would prefer to have a beer with. It has been described by some commentators as a "simple question [that has] become a litmus test for a candidate's likability and, it follows, his likelihood of getting elected" (Kitsock 2008).

The Problem of Information in Elections

One of the enduring curiosities of American politics is how voters manage to make informed decisions in elections, despite their lack of information on the topic. Beginning with the earliest models of voting behavior, scholars have noted how little American voters know about candidates and elections (Campbell et al. 1960). However, recent research has shown that voters, more often than not, make “correct,” i.e. aligned with their preferences, decisions in elections (Lau and Redlawsk 2001, 2006). Scholars have settled that this apparent disconnect can be solved by the use of informational shortcuts by voters. These shortcuts, called cues or heuristics, allow voters with low information to make collectively rational decisions in elections (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994).

What Cues do Voters Use?

Voting heuristics can take a wide variety of shapes and forms. Perhaps the most visible of voting heuristics is party, which lets the voter quickly identify the policy bundle with which a candidate identifies (Rahn 1993).³ Indeed, in their seminal work in the field of voting behavior, Campbell et al. (1960) argue that political proclivities are shaped by psychological and sociological factors early in life and, as a result, one’s “evaluative orientations” towards the political process and politics will tend to remain stable over a lifetime. Accordingly, items such as a candidate’s party identification serve as “cues by which the individual may evaluate the elements of politics.” Parties, then, can be seen as catalytic agents that facilitate participation in elections among the less-informed members of the electorate. Other heuristics include candidate ideology (Conover and Feldman 1989), group endorsements (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991), and candidate viability (Mutz 1997). Of particular interest to understanding how a candidate’s age influences

³ Although not termed a “heuristic,” this idea was first identified by Downs (1957).

voter behavior is candidate appearance (Lau and Redlawsk 2001).

As described by Lau and Redlawsk (2001), candidate appearance plays an important role as a heuristic for voters because it is so similar to the type of heuristics voters employ in everyday life. Throughout the day, voters encounter many people about whom they know very little and, yet, they are able to interact with and make social judgments about complete strangers. In the same way that they quickly assess strangers in their everyday life, voters are able to quickly assess candidates for public office. This suggests that candidates passively display visual information about themselves to voters. Indeed, past scholarship has shown that visual information independent of any policy cues can affect how voters evaluate and choose candidates (Banducci et al. 2008; Olivola and Todorov 2010; Shepard and Johns 2008; Todorov et al. 2005). Thus, voters find information about candidates, even without any active effort by candidates.

Cues as Stereotypes

The influence of candidate appearance on voter behavior has been best researched in the context of gender and racial voting cues. Racial and gender cues, much like party or ideology, signal to voters information about the issue positions of candidates. In looking at racial and gender cues, McDermott (1997) finds that voters tend to associate women and blacks with more liberal ideologies. In addition to classifying black and women candidates as having liberal positions on important issues, voters condition their vote on this information. In this way, race and gender provide important cues to voters. By what mechanism do race and gender provide cues to voters? According to McDermott (1997) voters classify candidates using stereotypes. Following on the work of Huddy and Terkildsen (1993), these stereotypes can be related to candidates' traits or candidates' beliefs. Trait stereotypes refer to the stereotypical traits assigned to a particular race

or gender. For example, men are considered to be more aggressive than women, and women are considered to be more compassionate than men. Belief stereotypes, on the other hand, refer to the stereotypical beliefs held by different genders or races. For example, men are considered to be more pro-war than women, and women are considered to support welfare more than men.

Building on these works, one strand of the literature on voter behavior focuses on the idea of descriptive representation, in which voters are more likely to vote for a particular political candidate when the voter and candidate share similar characteristics. Thus, instead of using party identification as a voting cue, voters rely on other qualities to inform their vote choice: shared race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, or personal traits. McDermott (1997), Matson and Fine (2006), Brians (2005), Koch (2000), and numerous others have found a connection between those demographic characteristics and voter choice. Given this, it is important to examine the impact of a voter's age to see if a similar pattern holds.

Descriptive Representation and Age

Young voters are notorious for their low turnout in American elections (Jones 2012; Kornbluh 2000; Miller and Shanks 1996). A potential reason for this low turnout could be a general sense of cynicism and distrust among youth voters toward the government and its officials. Indeed, given the fact that the current average age of Members of the House and Senators is 56.7 and 62.2 years old, respectively (Manning 2011), young voters may be exhibiting signs of a generational gap between themselves and their elected officials. Thus, the proclivity among young voters to support young candidates could stem from their collective belief that Congress, in general, is comprised of individuals whose age means that they are “out of touch” with the attitudes and political preferences that young voters consider to be most important. This theoretical mechanism has received support within the literature, as initial research suggests that

youth voters are more committed to turnout to vote when younger candidates are on the ballot (Pomante and Schraufnagel 2014). Though similar, our research suggests that the linkage between the age of a candidate and the age of a voter is not limited to youth voters; on the contrary, our theory suggests that voters of all ages will, *ceteris paribus*, prefer to vote for a candidate who is closest to themselves in age. Thus, our empirical analysis will illustrate that age similarity can act as a powerful force in motivating individuals – both young and old – to vote for their co-partisan candidate.

This belief that Congress is “out of touch” with the attitudes and political beliefs of young voters is likely to be the result of cohort effects. In examining the preferences of young voters, or “Millenials,” a recent Pew Research Center report concludes that members of this age group “stand out for their acceptance of homosexuality, interracial dating, [and] expanded roles for women and immigrants.” Additionally, the report notes that the percentage of people in a given cohort who self-identify as “liberal” decreases as the age of the cohort increases (Millenials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change 2011). Therefore, when compared to older, more conservative cohorts, it becomes clear that a policy chasm exists between young voters and the median Member of Congress (who, on average, falls within the “Baby Boomer” cohort). Young voters, then, seem to be best served by embracing the idea of descriptive representation and voting for candidates closest to them in age.

Older voters should follow a similar logic in displaying a preference to vote for a candidate who is closer to them in age. Rather than vote for a much younger candidate, older voters would see their policy preferences best articulated in Congress by voting for older candidates. These candidates would have been more likely to experience similar life circumstances as older voters; thus, older candidates would be the ideal choice for older voters looking to see their policy

proclivities enacted and protected – Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid being prime examples.

These theoretical expectations have firm footing in the descriptive representation literature, which has found that members of the electorate exhibit greater degrees of political efficacy and trust when a legislator shares the same race or gender as the voter. Indeed, the literature links the existence of descriptive representation to lowers levels of mistrust in government (Bobo and Gilliam Jr 1990), higher levels of legitimacy within ruling bodies (Tate 1994), an increase in differing views and opinions on issues with no already-formed consensus, and a greater incorporation of traditionally disadvantaged groups into the policymaking process (Mansbridge 1999). More important, however, is the fact that descriptive representation has been shown to have a direct link to substantive representation. Studying the representation of working class voters, Carnes (2012, 2013) finds that a legislator’s background, particularly if they are a member of the working class, appears to “have an independent effect on how they vote on economic policies, especially on issues seen as most important to the material welfare of working-class Americans” (2012, pg. 22). If such a linkage has been shown to exist among working class Americans, it seems likely that a similar relationship exists between Members of Congress and the electorate along age-based lines.

In general, the theoretical justification for why voters should prefer a candidate who is close to them in age can best be summarized by the notion of homophily. Literally meaning “love of the same,” homophily is the idea that “contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). Frequently studied within the context of network analysis, homophily results in “the demographic, technological, behavioral, and biological similarities of linked nodes” (Aral, Muchnik and

Sundararajan 2009). In its most simple form, then, homophily suggests that individuals prefer to associate with those who are most similar to themselves. Drawing on this burgeoning literature within sociology and network analysis, we argue that voters are homophilous in their behavior regarding candidates' ages. More specifically, the sort of homophily we imagine is one where voters prefer to vote for candidates who are closest to them in age.

However, because no one election is similar to another, it is important to account for contextual factors that increase or decrease the electorate's reliance on age as a heuristic. Specifically, our theory suggests that age will be more frequently used as a voting heuristic when the information context is comparatively low. When such an election exists, voters will implicitly rely on the logic underpinning the voluminous descriptive representation literature. As the information surrounding an election increases, voters will be more likely to eschew the heuristics studied by scholars of descriptive representation in favor of candidates' issue positions and partisan affiliations. While this seems like a reasonable assumption, there is no well-accepted standard within the discipline as to how elections should be classified along an information continuum. To assist us in this endeavor, we utilize the relative number of searches for election contests as measured by Google Trends. This service captures the degree to which users of Google's search engine are seeking out information on any given topic. To err on the side of caution, we search from the window including 2008-2014. Figure 1 displays the relative number of web traffic on Google's search engine for U.S. House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections.⁴

⁴ The specific phrases we searched for were "us senate elections," "us house elections," and "state gubernatorial elections." The trends displayed in Figure 1 are nearly identical to those obtained using different search phrases. While we recognize that this is not perfect, it is still a useful quantitative metric as to the ordering of elections along an information continuum.

[Figure 1 goes here]

As shown in Figure 1, all of the electoral offices understandably see a spike in web traffic in 2010 and 2012. Comparatively, Senate elections are the most frequently searched for electoral office across the time series. The second most frequently queried electoral office on Google is House elections. Finally, the Google Trends data show that gubernatorial elections are the least frequently searched for contest. Using these data as our guide, we classify our elections along an informational continuum as shown in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 goes here]

As illustrated, our theory suggests that midterm elections are inherently lower in information than are presidential-year elections. Accordingly, all of the elections held in 2010 are to the left of the elections held in 2012 on our scale of information levels. Within the two distinct groupings by year, elections are categorized, in increasing order of information level, as gubernatorial, House, and Senate. Moving from left to right along this scale of informational context, our theoretical prediction is that the use of age as a voting heuristic will decrease.

Furthermore, while we expect the age between a voter and a candidate to function as a heuristic in an electoral setting, we do not expect the effect of this relationship to operate independent of partisan affiliation. Indeed, an individual's partisan affiliation continues to be the strongest predictor of how she will vote (Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2000, 2002). There is also reason to believe that age as a cue will operate differently between Democrats and Republicans. Within the popular press, the Democratic Party has often been referred to as a "big tent," while the Republican Party has been frequently viewed as more internally homogeneous (Hendin 2010; Chaddock 2009; Pesca 2004; Brownstein 2011). Because the parties have such diverse compositions, it makes little sense to assume that age will operate as a heuristic in the same way

for Democrats as it does for Republicans.

Such an assumption has received support from recent work within political science that suggests that the differences between the core constituencies of the Democratic and Republican parties produce different incentives for the party organizations themselves. Indeed, Democrats are more of a “group based” party that seeks to appease a myriad of socioeconomic and demographic groups within the party’s ranks. Republicans, on the other hand, are more ideologically motivated (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). These differences have produced what Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) call an “asymmetry” in the nature of American politics: “the Democratic Party is fundamentally a group coalition, [while] the Republican Party can be most accurately characterized as the vehicle of an ideological movement” (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Because the composition of each party’s base of support within the electorate is so different, our analysis examines the effect of age as a voting heuristic among co-partisan voters and candidates.⁵

Following from our theory are two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 *Among partisans, as the relative age gap between a voter and a co-partisan candidate increases, the voter will be less likely to vote for the candidate.*

Hypothesis 2 *Voters will be most likely to use a candidate’s age as a voting heuristic when information contexts surrounding an election are low. As information levels increase, voters will be less likely to use such a cue.*

Data and Methods

In order to test the hypotheses about the effect of voters’ and candidates’ age on voting behavior,

⁵ More explicitly, by “co-partisan,” we are referring to the situation in which the voter shares the same partisan affiliation as a candidate.

we utilize data from the 2010 and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Using the CCES as a data source has multiple advantages (Ansolabehere 2010; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2012). First, the CCES is the end result of the efforts of 30 different research teams throughout the country. Each research team conducted their own respective analysis by asking 120 questions – half of which are “common content” across all teams, while the other half are unique to each individual research team – to a 1,000 person sample survey.⁶ The breadth of the survey has resulted in an impressive sample size of 55,400 common cases. Furthermore, the autonomy afforded to each individual research team has yielded additional sets of questions that aid in the development of a better understanding of the factors that motivate the preferences and voting choices of voters.

In addition to its large sample size, the CCES is a reliable way to test the hypotheses due to its assiduous collection of data. By conducting both pre- and post-election interviews with respondents, the CCES survey allows for a more complete picture of each individual respondent. In the pre-election interviews, subjects were asked questions that sought to ascertain their respective preferences, political knowledge, demographic background, and planned vote choice. In the post-election interviews, subjects were asked to name the candidate for whom they voted. By presenting various data from voters across Congressional districts, the CCES lends itself quite nicely to a study on the preferences of voters of all ages.

However, despite its diligent collection of data on voters, the CCES data set does not

⁶ The CCES was conducted digitally by YouGov/Polimetrix, using sample matching. Though this process is non-random, it uses a particular methodology to obtain a “representative” sample. A random target sample is drawn from the overall population (obtained from Census data), which is then paired with a matched sample. This sample seeks “to find an available respondent who is as similar as possible to the selected member of the target sample.” This yields “a sample of respondents who have the same measured characteristics as the target sample.” Because the matched sample is similar to the target sample, it is deemed representative.

supply information on the age of the candidates running for office during the 2010 and 2012 congressional and gubernatorial elections. Accordingly, this data was collected from four primary sources: Congressional biographies of the winner of each respective election; the candidates' campaign websites; newspaper articles and other journalistic accounts of the candidates and campaigns; and other third-party organizations, such as Project Vote Smart. This data was then merged with the information contained within the CCES data set to create the basis for this paper's statistical analysis.

Because we are interested in the effect of age as a voting heuristic across different informational and electoral contexts, the 2010 and 2012 election data are not pooled but are instead analyzed separately. Furthermore, the elections – House, Senate, and gubernatorial – are analyzed independently of one another. In 2010, in addition to the entire House of Representatives, 37 governorships were up for election, as were 37 U.S. Senate seats. In 2012, the entire House was once again up for election, as were 33 Senate seats and 11 governorships. Thus, we have ample races in which to test our theory.

In analyzing the effect of age as a cue for voters across election contexts, we conduct two logistic regressions for each election studied per year: one for Democratic partisans and one for Republican partisans. Thus, while each model has similar component parts (e.g. shared race or gender), the effects being captured by each model are salient only within the sample of Democratic or Republican identifiers. Partisanship is measured by respondents' self-placement along the typical seven-point party identification scale, with a response of 1 being the most Democratic and 7 being the most Republican. This scale is then collapsed into three groups: Democrats (including independent leaners), Republicans (also including independent leaners), and independents. The models we use each take the following functional form:

$$y_i = \Lambda(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{AgeDistance}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i) \quad (1)$$

where Λ is the logistic distribution. The dependent variable, y_i , is an indicator for whether or not individual i voted for her fellow co-partisan candidate in her district or state, depending on the election analyzed. Beta one captures the difference in age between individual i and the candidate running in her district or state, while \mathbf{X}_i is a vector of control variables. These controls include a series of dummy variables that capture whether or not individual i shares the same gender as the candidate, whether individual i shares the same race as the candidate, and whether the candidate is running as an incumbent. The models also include controls for an individual's income, interest in news and current events, and whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election.

In order to address concerns about heteroskedasticity, the results of each regression are calculated with standard errors clustered on the states.

One important part of our research design is our choice to focus on the difference in age between a partisan voter and their co-partisan candidate. Why focus on only co-partisans to the exclusion of alternative candidates? While our theory is simple to reason through, testing for age effects in actual voters is substantially more complicated. Consider a voter's age, V , and the ages of a Democratic and a Republican candidate, D and R . The order of these ages, e.g. $D < V < R$ or $D < R < V$, makes a straightforward measure of distance between voters and candidates difficult, as any such measure necessarily includes multiple ages, directions, and differences. While we considered operationalizing age differences in various ways that sought to capture both the direction and magnitude of the difference, all of our earliest attempts ran into one common shortcoming: they are all theoretically modified by the partisanship of the voter.⁷

⁷ As an example, one of our earliest measurement strategies captured age differences as $||D - V| - |R - V||$. How to adjust any such measure to be modified by partisanship, either by weights or interaction terms, is neither straightforward nor driven by theory.

In light of the difficulties involved with predicting vote choice between partisans, we opt to solve a simpler problem as a first cut at testing our theory. Within the last decade or so of American politics, the practice of ticket splitting has become increasingly rare. The result is that partisans in the electorate tend to vote for their co-partisan candidates at all electoral levels (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). This is because, in the contemporary era, Americans are increasingly concerned with which party represents them in Congress and not which individual (Jacobson 2015). As such, we make a simplifying assumption that, for partisan voters, the default is to vote for your co-partisan candidate. This reduces any potential difference measure to simply $|D - V|$ or $|R - V|$ and allows us to specify our models as voting for a co-partisan candidate as a function of the difference between the voter and that same candidate. Thus, while it is true that American voters are increasingly loyal to their own party, the models we analyze here do not preclude the possibility of voters defecting from their own party. Our modeling and operationalization choices merely assume that partisan loyalty is a voter's default position. Additionally, by testing our hypotheses separately for each party, we are easily able to account for any party effects on vote choice. Though later we provide an analysis of the role of age as a voting heuristic among independents as a robustness check on our results, we leave to future research more in-depth questions about how age mediates vote choice in the absence of partisan signals.

Results

The first set of elections analyzed is the 2010 midterm elections. In the House elections, we have a sample size of 18,534 respondents for the Democratic model and a sample size of 19,108 for the Republican model. For the Senate models, we have a sample size of 15,557 for Democrats and a sample size of 14,759 for Republicans. Finally, for the gubernatorial races, our models

have sample sizes of 16,360 and 15,791 for Democrats and Republicans, respectively. Before presenting the results of the models, however, it is useful to analyze descriptive statistics about our key independent variable – the distance between the voter and the candidate. Such information is presented below in Table 1. As can be seen, the standard deviation in the relative distance between the voter and the candidate is similar for both Democrats and Republicans. This is true for both election year and the specific contest.

[Table 1 about here]

The results of the 2010 election models are shown below in Tables 2 and 3. As can be seen, the coefficient on the variable capturing the distance in age between the voter and the candidate is negative and statistically significant in both the Democratic and the Republican models for the House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections. This indicates that, as the age gap between the voter and the candidate increases, the voter is less likely to vote for that candidate.

[Tables 2 and 3 here.]

For the 2012 models, in no case does an increasing distance in age between a voter and her co-partisan candidate lower the probability that she votes for her co-partisan candidate. While these findings contradict the part of our theory regarding the distance between the age of a voter and the age of a candidate, they are in line with our theorizing about the role of information in elections. Given that it was a presidential election cycle, the 2012 election was a high-information affair. Additionally, Republicans were motivated to vote against an incumbent president they held in disdain. This dislike, combined with the increasingly “nationalized” nature of American elections wrought by presidential coattail effects (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) likely obviated the need for Republican and Democratic voters to rely on a candidate’s age as a

voting cue at any level.⁸

[Tables 4 and 5 here.]

Because the models are calculated using logistic regression, the marginal effects of increasing age discrepancies between voters and candidates are not readily interpretable. To provide the substantive effect of the distance between a voter and candidate's age on the voter's choice, we calculated predicted probabilities for each of the models. For the 2010 House elections, a one standard deviation increase in the age gap between the voter and the candidate reduces the probability of the voter casting a vote for his or her co-partisan candidate by 5.14% for Democrats and 2.8% for Republicans. In the 2010 Senate elections, a one standard deviation increase in the age gap reduces this same probability by 7.62% for Democrats and 3.38% for Republicans. In the 2010 gubernatorial elections, a one standard deviation in the age gap reduced this probability by 8.3% for Democrats and 5.78% for Republicans. For the sake of comparison, in every model specification, age has a bigger effect on reducing the probability of voting for a co-partisan than does the effect of sharing a gender on increasing the probability of voting for a co-partisan. This finding is in line with those discovered by Sigelman and Sigelman (1982) and Piliavin (1987). The effects of age discrepancies on vote choice are presented graphically in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 about here]

As shown in Figure 3, increasing distances between a candidate's age and a voter's age lowers the likelihood that a voter casts a vote for her co-partisan candidate. For Democrats, moving from the smallest age distance to the greatest lowers the likelihood of voting for a co-

⁸ Age distance has a statistically significant relationship in the 2012 models for both Democrats and Republicans when controls for interest in politics and current affairs, income, and a dummy variable for voting in 2008 are omitted. These models can be found in the Online Appendix.

partisan House candidate from 76% to 58%. For Republicans, this same change lowers the likelihood of voting for a co-partisan House candidate from 88% to 76%. In Senate elections, moving from the smallest age distance to the greatest lowers the likelihood that a Democrat votes for her co-partisan candidate from 76% to 50%; for Republicans, this change drops the likelihood of voting for a co-partisan candidate from 90% to 74%. Finally, for gubernatorial elections, increasing the distance from the smallest age gap to the biggest age gap lowers the likelihood that a Democrat will vote for her co-partisan candidate from 78% to 48%. This same change lowers the likelihood that a Republican will vote for her co-partisan candidate from 85% to 55%.

These results provide support for our first hypothesis that increasing distances between the age of a voter and the age of a candidate leads to decreased support for that candidate. However, the substantive effects of these age gaps casts doubt on our second hypothesis about information contexts surrounding elections. In all instances, the effect of age as a heuristic is more pronounced in the 2010 midterm elections. This comports with what we know about midterm elections being characterized as low information affairs, while presidential election years tend to see less use of heuristics (such as age, gender, or race) among members of the electorate due to “presidential coattail” effects. Within the election years, however, our theory is disproven. For Republicans and Democrats in 2010, for instance, the effect of age as a heuristic was greatest in gubernatorial elections, followed by senatorial elections and, finally, by House elections.

What explains this contradiction with our theoretical expectation? One possible explanation is the role of education. A large literature in political science argues that education has many beneficent effects on citizens in regards to the political process. For example, highly educated citizens are relatively more active and engaged in politics (Abramowitz 2010), and are

also more able to engage in ideological thinking (Jacoby 1991). In addition, citizens who possess higher levels of education are more informed and knowledgeable about politics (Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida 1989). One prominent analysis of the use of heuristics found that voting shortcuts are useful to the electorate conditional upon their degree of accessibility. Therefore, “some citizens are better than others” at navigating the political realm (Huckfeldt et al. 1999). The key that unlocks this skill, we argue, is increasing levels of education. Without the benefits of a civic education, citizens will be unable to use any heuristic – let alone, the age gap between themselves and a candidate – to inform their vote choice.

To test whether those members of the electorate who have higher levels of education are more adroit at using age as a voting heuristic, we reanalyze each of our models conditional upon respondents’ level of education. Specifically, the models are restricted to those who have at least some college education. Because our earlier results suggest that age appears to operate as a voting heuristic only in the 2010 midterm elections, we omit the 2012 election from our analyses here. When comparing the results of these models with our original analyses, we find that the effect of age as a voting heuristic has a bigger effect for the more educated members of the electorate in all cases. Table 6, shown below, illustrates the difference between our original models and the models we reanalyzed among those individuals with at least some college education. Each cell shows the percentage increase in the effect of age as a heuristic for the more highly educated members of the electorate compared to our base models.

[Table 6 about here]

As shown in Table 6, the usefulness of age as a voting heuristic is much more pronounced for the more highly educated members of the electorate. Indeed, the effect is up to nearly 27% greater at its highest value. Thus, these models suggest that the argument put forth by Huckfeldt

et al. (1999) continues to be true – those members of the electorate who are highly educated and, therefore, have cues more readily accessible, are best able to use them. Age, it appears, is no exception to this finding.

As a further test of our theory, we analyzed the effect of age as a voting heuristic among self-described independents. Absent a partisan cue to guide their vote choice, independents should be among the most likely to utilize age as a voting heuristic. For our test of independents' use of age as a voting heuristic, we regressed a dichotomous variable that captures whether or not the individual voted for the younger of two candidates on seven independent variables: the age distance between the voter and the youngest candidate (absolute value), a dummy variable for non-whites, a dummy variable for gender, a dummy variable for whether or not an incumbent was running for re-election, a measure of political interest, income, and an indicator for whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election. It should be noted that these models are not directly comparable to the estimates derived from our main models because we are unable to pair independents' race or gender with a co-partisan candidate. However, despite this difference, the models show that, in two-thirds of the elections analyzed, increasing age distances lowers the probability that an independent voter casts her vote for the younger of two candidates. The results of these estimations, as well as those described above, can be found in the Online Appendix.

Discussion

In this paper, we sought to determine whether the relative distance in age between a voter and a candidate has any effect on a voter's decision on election day. Our results suggest that, among members of the respective parties, increasing distances between the voter's age and the candidate's age reduces the likelihood that the voter will cast a vote for his or her fellow co-

partisan running for office. Within the context of low-information elections, such as the 2010 midterm elections, citizens can and do use age as a voting cue. In this sense, our first and most important hypothesis receives a tremendous degree of support.

Our hypothesis regarding information levels and the usefulness of age as heuristic received considerably less support. We hypothesized that midterm elections, given their relatively low information status, would see a higher usage of age as a heuristic than presidential elections. In all cases this hypothesis was correct. However, our belief about the ordering of elections within years was less correct; indeed, there was no clearly discernible pattern to the ordering of House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections in regards to information contexts and the use of age as a heuristic. Instead, we posit that education levels are better able to explain the varying degrees of usefulness of age as a heuristic. A reanalysis of our original models yields results suggesting that those members of the electorate who are more educated are better able to use age as a heuristic. In this regard, our finding is in line with much of the literature on social cognition and the importance of cues' accessibility in determining their usefulness.

From a normative standpoint, our results have a few implications. First, our results suggest that people prefer to vote for candidates closer to them in age. Thus, like Caprara et al. (2007) argue, when it comes to the relationship between voters and candidates, "likeness goes with liking." For political parties, our findings suggest that extra attention should be given to the age of the electorate in any given district or state when deciding which candidate to run. Though race and gender are often important elements of any campaign and ascertaining these statistics of the electorate is essential to any electoral strategy, our analysis suggests that age is a factor that should not be overlooked. Finally, our results suggest that political and civic education is as important as ever to the health of a democratic system. Through increased education, voters are

better able to use heuristics in informing their voting decision. With more informed decisions in the voting booth, a more representative and responsive democracy is possible.

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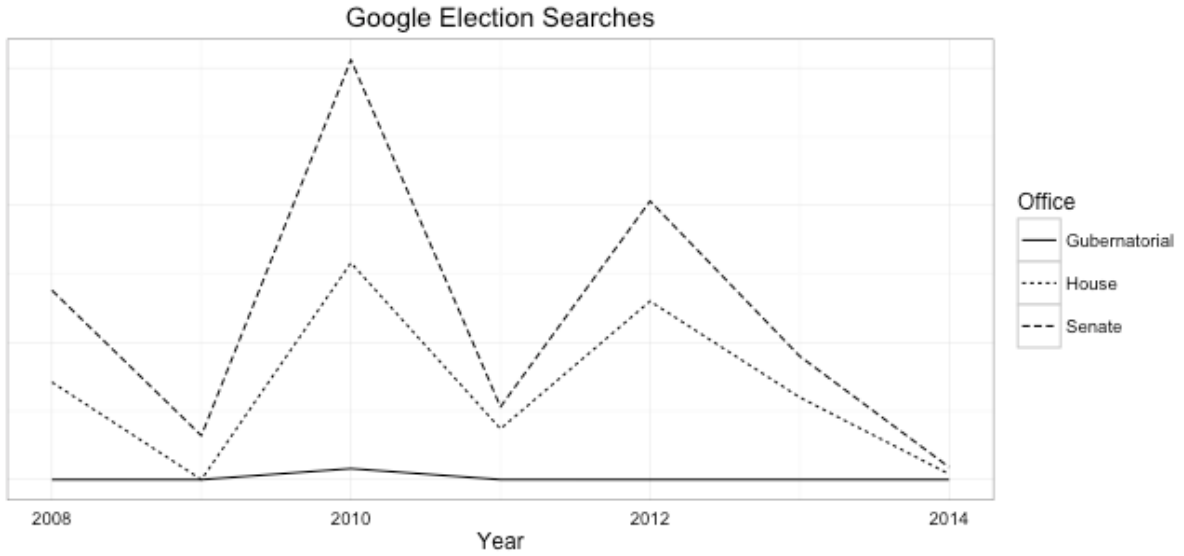


Figure 1: *Google Searches for Elections*. This figure shows the relative degree to which Google users searched for information on U.S. Senate elections, U.S. House elections, and state gubernatorial elections.

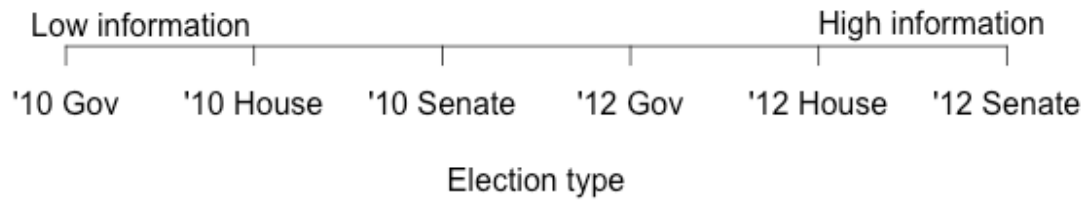


Figure 2: *Information Contexts by Electoral Type*. This figure shows the theoretical ordering of information levels by electoral context. From left to right, the elections are seen as having higher information levels.

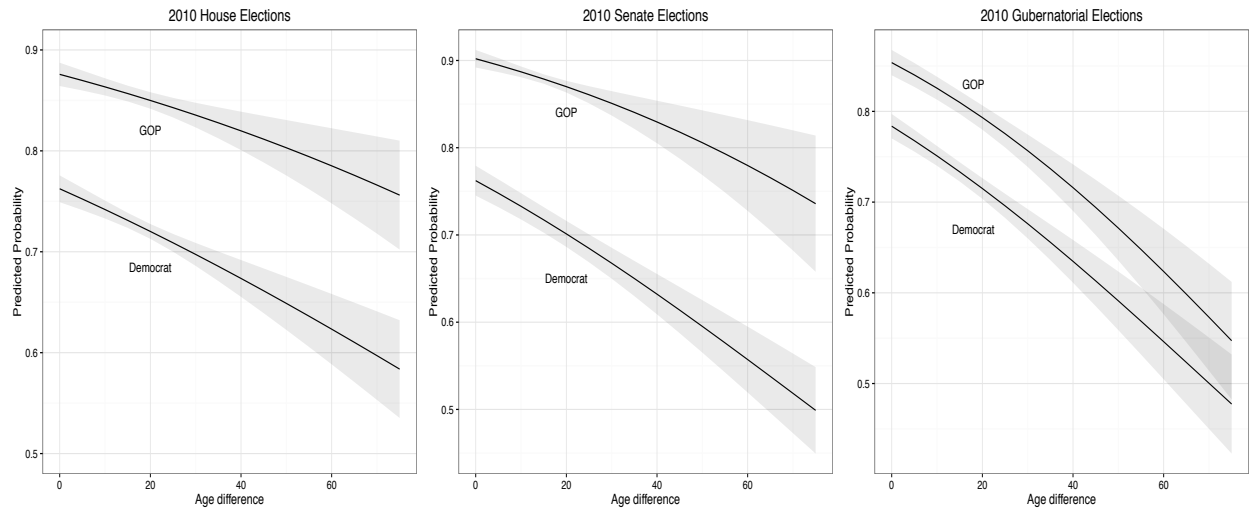


Figure 3: *Predicted Probabilities*. These plots show the predicted probability of voting for the Democratic and Republican co-partisan candidates as the age distance variable increases in the 2010 elections.

	2010			2012		
	House	Senate	Gov.	House	Senate	Gov.
Voters' ages with Democrats						
S.D.	11.82	11.98	11.56	12.42	13.87	11.51
Mean	15.64	15.80	14.94	16.55	17.55	14.04
Min/Max	0/64	0/64	0/54	0/68	0/64	0/45
Voters' ages with Republicans						
S.D.	10.48	10.12	9.28	10.91	10.97	9.91
Mean	14.25	13.38	12.15	15.10	15.41	13.12
Min/Max	0/63	0/58	0/49	0/68	0/60	0/51

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics on Age Distance Variable.* This table shows the mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values for the variable that captures the difference in age between voters and candidates.

	(1) Vote Dem. (House)	(2) Vote Dem. (Gov.)	(2) Vote Dem. (Senate)
Age distance	-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.018*** (0.002)	-0.016*** (0.002)
Shared gender	0.073* (0.037)	0.070 (0.049)	-0.017 (0.057)
Shared race	0.383*** (0.048)	-0.219*** (0.044)	0.544*** (0.087)
Dem. incumbent	0.491*** (0.041)	-0.001 (0.084)	0.912*** (0.069)
Political interest	-0.520*** (0.024)	-0.582*** (0.024)	-0.463*** (0.025)
Income	0.054*** (0.005)	0.060*** (0.006)	0.042*** (0.006)
Vote in 2008	0.899*** (0.027)	0.890*** (0.030)	0.869*** (0.027)
Constant	-2.379*** (0.150)	-1.478*** (0.149)	-2.359*** (0.182)
<i>N</i>	18,534	16,360	15,557
<i>AIC</i>	17821.895	15601.176	15434.981

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 2: *Democratic models, 2010*. This table shows the use of age as a voting heuristic among self-identified Democrats in 2010. It also includes controls for interest in news and current events, income, and whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election.

	(1) Vote GOP (House)	(2) Vote GOP (Gov.)	(2) Vote GOP (Senate)
Age distance	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.021*** (0.002)	-0.016*** (0.003)
Shared gender	0.142*** (0.034)	0.078 (0.058)	0.201*** (0.044)
Shared race	0.640*** (0.053)	0.101 (0.086)	0.282*** (0.064)
GOP incumbent	0.141* (0.064)	-0.000 (0.082)	-0.147 (0.086)
Political interest	-0.843*** (0.042)	-0.762*** (0.048)	-0.903*** (0.045)
Income	0.052*** (0.007)	0.053*** (0.006)	0.080*** (0.009)
Vote in 2008	0.936*** (0.034)	0.836*** (0.035)	0.976*** (0.038)
Constant	-1.688*** (0.149)	-1.097*** (0.161)	-1.423*** (0.185)
<i>N</i>	19,108	15,791	14,759
<i>AIC</i>	13972.248	13395.361	9714.265

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 3: *Republican models, 2010*. This table shows the use of age as a voting heuristic among self-identified Republicans in 2010. It also includes controls for interest in news and current events, income, and whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election.

	(1) Vote Dem. (House)	(2) Vote Dem. (Gov.)	(2) Vote Dem. (Senate)
Age distance	0.005** (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)
Shared gender	-0.013 (0.040)	0.030 (0.145)	0.135* (0.053)
Shared race	0.373*** (0.076)	-0.120 (0.140)	-0.268** (0.093)
Dem. incumbent	0.458*** (0.065)	0.092 (0.401)	0.559** (0.177)
Political interest	-0.316*** (0.022)	-0.401*** (0.042)	-0.367*** (0.030)
Income	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	0.005*** (0.001)
Vote in 2008	0.707*** (0.022)	0.723*** (0.062)	0.775*** (0.032)
Constant	-0.882*** (0.082)	-0.219 (0.236)	-0.564** (0.181)
<i>N</i>	16,632	2,632	14,497
<i>AIC</i>	13599.260	2082.861	10508.455

Robust standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 4: *Democratic models, 2012*. This table shows the use of age as a voting heuristic among self-identified Democrats in 2012. It also includes controls for interest in news and current events, income, and whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election.

	(1) Vote GOP (House)	(2) Vote GOP (Gov.)	(2) Vote GOP (Senate)
Age distance	0.008*** (0.002)	0.006 (0.008)	0.005 (0.005)
Shared gender	0.028 (0.048)	0.122 (0.133)	0.100* (0.050)
Shared race	0.584*** (0.052)	0.272 (0.264)	0.250 (0.175)
GOP incumbent	0.428*** (0.064)	-0.111 (0.285)	0.131 (0.357)
Political interest	-0.389*** (0.024)	-0.399*** (0.058)	-0.452*** (0.029)
Income	0.004*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Vote in 2008	0.665*** (0.023)	0.651*** (0.094)	0.649*** (0.037)
Constant	-0.800*** (0.104)	-0.509 (0.409)	-0.221*** (0.174)
<i>N</i>	15,297	2,479	12,046
<i>AIC</i>	10667.809	1944.644	9405.522

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 5: *Republican models, 2012*. This table shows the use of age as a voting heuristic among self-identified Republicans in 2012. It also includes controls for interest in news and current events, income, and whether the respondent reported voting in the 2008 election.

	House	2010 Senate	Gov.
Democrats	13.23%	5.25%	6.27%
Republicans	26.43%	20.12%	11.07%

Table 6: *Effect of Education on the Use of Age as a Voting Heuristic.* This table shows the percentage increase in the effect of age as a voting heuristic among those who have at least some college education. Estimates are calculated only for the 2010 midterm elections.