Split-ticket Voting and Political Awareness

The origin of divided government in the United States has been the target of numerous studies in the 1990s. Indeed, some have argued that divided government may be the most important political phenomenon of our time (Cox and Kernall 1991; Jacobson 1991; Mayhew 1991). In considering the origin of divided government some research has focused on structural explanations such as ballot mechanisms, staggered elections and gerrymandering while others have looked to individual characteristics such as partisan strength and political awareness. No doubt both structural and individual characteristics share responsibility for divided government. Structural characteristics provide the opportunity to split a ticket, individuals make conscious decisions to do so, and therefore culpa must lie with both.

The mission of this paper is to investigate the effects of individual components of political awareness on split-ticket voting considering the often one-sided information environment of House elections. More specifically, this paper will look at the role that political knowledge, exposure to politics, and interest in politics play in seeing past the single dominant message of an out-partisan House incumbent, receiving the partisan challenger’s message and casting a united ballot. In what direction and to what degree will these voter characteristics help or hinder one in casting a ballot that is consistent with their partisanship, and so avoid splitting a ticket. To the extent that one-sided House races are a product of the information environment, influenced by advantages of incumbency and the single member district system, we will also be considering structural causes of divided government.

Why do we care about the effects of political awareness on split-ticket voting? First, we should be interested in the effects of knowledge, interest, and exposure separately because they may further tell us about the voting population. What kind of awareness is related to voting on partisan lines? Do voters need only one, two, or all of these characteristics if they are to see past a dominant out-partisan message and receive the partisan challenger’s message? The individual components of political awareness are sometimes combined into a single measure of political awareness though they may have distinct effects on opinion and behavior. Is the combination of these characteristics wise when looking at split-ticket voting?

Second, knowing the separate effects of knowledge, interest and exposure is important from a normative perspective. Seeing beyond the dominant message and receiving alternative views on an issue, whether in the context of a House campaign, media priming, or any other, is considered healthy for democracy. In considering democratic implications of the level of public awareness, many have examined only one aspect of awareness, usually political knowledge (see for example Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). It could be that knowledge is not as important as other components of awareness. Interest and or exposure to politics may be just as, or more, helpful in allowing one to receive alternative views.
Information Environment and Split-Ticket Voting

Before looking at the effects of knowledge, interest, and exposure we must first show (1) that House elections can indeed be characterized as information environments dominated by a single message and (2) that ticket splitting is a product of this environment. The first is not a difficult case to make, while the second is, as there is a large literature that argues that ticket splitting is an instrumental act, not a product of one’s environment.

The Information Environment of House Elections

Mounting a House campaign in the 1980s and 1990s has become increasingly difficult. Many scholars have shown that incumbents enjoy advantages in communications resources, name recognition, and financial contribution (see for example Jacobson 1983 and Mayhew 1974). The increasing costs and declining ability to raise funds has further hurt challengers’ chances of running a competitive House campaign (Abramowitz 1991). Moreover, local press, radio, and television give little coverage to House elections making campaigns that much more influential in determining the information environment (Baker 1995, 122). The combination of incumbent advantages, increasing costs and reliance on candidates for information creates a one-sided information environment biased toward the incumbent. This one-sided environment limits the voter’s ability to receive the challenger’s message.

Split-ticket Voting and the Environment

Much research has portrayed ticket splitting as an instrumental act on the part of the voter. This research program argues that voters split a ticket intentionally in an effort to balance the powers of government between the two parties. Voters split a ticket in an attempt to balance, say, a right of center Republican presidential candidate with a left of center Democratic congressional candidate (Fiorina 1996; Ingerman and Villani 1993; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995). The strategic voter falls somewhere between their partisan candidate and the center on a left-right scale and so chooses to vote for their partisan presidential candidate and the congressional candidate of the competing party hoping that by doing so policy will come closer to their ideological position. Critics of policy balancing theory have shown that reported preference of divided government has little or no bearing on ticket splitting (Singelman, Wahlbeck, and Buell 1997) and that voters do not necessarily chose a combination of presidential and congressional candidates nearest their ideological point (Born 1994).

Burden and Kimball’s (1998) study of the 1992 election supports the environment theory of split-ticket voting. They argue that candidates, not voters, are responsible and show that ticket splitting increases as the margin of spending between congressional candidates increases. Further, ticket splitting is consistent in its direction within a district. In districts where a Democratic incumbent out spends the Republican challenger by a large margin, ticket splitters tend to be Republicans voting for Dole in the presidential race and voting for the Democratic incumbent in the congressional race. This works the same in districts with a Republican incumbent where ticket splitters tend to be Democrats who vote for Clinton and the Republican incumbent. So, ticket splitting will vary across districts in magnitude (amount of ticket splitting) and direction (party of candidate chosen for presidency and congress) according to the winning candidate’s fraction of total spending in the congressional contest and the candidate’s party affiliation, respectively. The voter is not splitting a ticket in a conscious effort to divide
government, but doing so because of the information environment, which is, for the most part, determined by actions of the candidates. Challengers do not have the funds necessary to compete with the incumbent and so have low visibility, which then limits the actions of voters.

**Knowledge, Interest, and Exposure**

I have presented the argument that House elections take place in an environment consisting of largely one dominant message that encourages split-ticket voting. We now investigate the effects of political knowledge, interest in politics, and exposure to politics in allowing the voter to see past the dominant out-partisan incumbent and receive the partisan challenger’s message within this environment. Most current research in the area of split-ticket voting has focused on either defending or attacking the policy balancing model and has largely ignored the possible effects of the information environment and individual voter characteristics. There are some exceptions. Beck et al. (1992), looking at 1990 Ohio state-wide races find that interest in politics has no significant relationship to voting for candidates from both parties, but they do not consider effects of either knowledge or exposure. The state-wide races in their study include races for Secretary of State, Attorney General, Auditor, and Treasurer. Some may question whether state-level campaigns such as these can be generalized to national campaigns. Certainly the information environments must be different, as it is unlikely that candidates for State Auditor and Treasurer will be involved in advertising, or campaigning in general, similar to that of House candidates. If the information environments differ and information is key in understanding ticket splitting then it would be unwise to generalize about the effects of interest, knowledge, and exposure on vote choice from state-wide elections to House elections.

Where Beck et al. only look at the effect of a single measure of political awareness – interest in politics, this paper will add measures for political knowledge and exposure. Some studies have combined several components falling under the label of political awareness creating a single measure. Chong, McClosky and Zaller (1983) combine political knowledge, political participation and education in their conceptualization of awareness in looking at Democratic and Capitalist values. Cassel (1984) use’s a similar combination in looking at stability in public opinion. Zaller (1992) is the only one to combine measure when looking at House elections. He employs his reception-acceptance model of information flow and citizen preferences in explaining the role of political awareness in resistance to persuasion by a dominant political message. He finds that political awareness, measured by using a combination of education, media exposure, participation in politics, interest in politics, and political knowledge, is related to reception of the challenger’s message and rejection of the out-partisan incumbent’s message.

While knowledge, interest, and exposure are highly correlated and combining them into a single measure of awareness seems sensible, this method has been criticized. Krosnick and Brannon (1993) find that combining measures of knowledge, interest, and exposure into one measure may obscure unique effects of the individual components (see also Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Rahn, Krosnick and Breuning 1994). In their study of presidential evaluation during the Gulf War and resistance to media priming, they find that a single measure of awareness is associated with reduced priming (greater resistance to the dominant message). But, looking at knowledge, interest, and exposure separately,
they find that high levels of knowledge enhance priming, while high levels of exposure and interest reduce priming. They also show that when two of the variables are combined they may have different effects. Oddly, combining interest and exposure, which when considered separately reduce priming, enhances priming. For our purposes, we need simply recognize that knowledge, interest, exposure and combinations of the three may have different effects on seeing beyond a dominant message and so may have different effects on split-ticket voting.

**Approach**

Where does the research go from here? Do we have reason to believe that Zaller’s use of an all encompassing measure of political awareness in studying House elections may hide effects of the individual components, or does each influence ticket splitting in a similar direction and to a similar degree?

In testing this question, I will look at the individual effects of knowledge, interest, and exposure on split-ticket voting. Prior research has look at either a single component of political awareness or combined components into an all-encompassing measure that does not consider the individual effects separately. While they are highly correlated, neither knowledge of nor interest in politics should help one in receiving a challenger’s message without high levels of exposure to politics. We should expect this to be the case more so in House elections than with media priming or other cases of a single dominant message. Many challengers are inexperienced and do not enter the public sphere at the district level until the campaign when they must compete with the, comparatively, widely known incumbent who enjoys all of the advantages mentioned above. This should dampen the effects that general political knowledge has in receiving the challenger’s message. Being able to identify which party has the majority in the House or who Al Gore is will not help one in receiving a challenger’s message. One must have exposure and be up on the current political events if their knowledge is going to help them see beyond the dominant incumbent message. That challengers are new to the public sphere should also dampen the effects that interest in the campaign will have in receiving the challenger’s message. The interest one has in the campaign may only be interest at the presidential level where little exposure is needed to receive the needed information.\(^1\) Considering the potential limits of interest and knowledge, I expect that exposure will provide greater resistance to the incumbent’s message. Likewise, combining exposure with knowledge and interest should enhance the effects of both.

We should expect combinations of interest and knowledge to enhance resistance to a dominant message also. But, it is less clear how this effect would be particularly different in House campaigns than for other cases of a dominant message. One can imagine where interest or knowledge would be more important in picking up a less popular message, but I believe that exposure is the key to receiving a challenger’s message in House campaigns.\(^2\) For this reason I will limit this paper to the study of the individual effects of the three components and combinations of exposure with interest and knowledge.

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\(^1\) This assumption seems plausible considering the difference in turnout between presidential elections and off year election.

\(^2\) One can imagine a case of an issue that involves structural actors or processes such as court decisions, actions of Congress, or actions of the Presidency that would require a great degree of political knowledge and minimal exposure to see past the dominant message.
This paper will not try to totally explain ticket splitting, but look only at the
effects of interest, knowledge and exposure. The only other voter characteristic that
should be considered is partisan strength as it has been found to be positively correlated
with political awareness, and, like political awareness, negatively correlated with splitting
a ticket (Zaller 1992; Beck 1992). We want to be sure that the effects found between
components of political awareness and splitting a ticket are not simply differences in
partisan strength. Because ticket splitting is done primarily in the direction of the
incumbent – voting for the out-partisan incumbent and the partisan presidential candidate
(see Burden and Kimball 1998 above), we will consider total ticket splitting as opposed
to looking at ticket splitting between Republicans and Democrats. We will also have to
consider the information environment in which the awareness variables are affecting
ticket splitting. Some districts’ dominant message will be stronger than others will and
we should expect levels of knowledge, interest and exposure to affect voters more or less
according to the strength of the message.

Design

I will use 1996 American National Election Study in testing my hypothesis. The
NES study is a widely used national survey and includes satisfactory measures of my
concepts. The data set includes close-ended questions, which are best when considering
levels of political awareness (Rahn, Krosnick, and Brening 1994; Krosnick and Berent
1993).

In measuring political knowledge I will use knowledge of institutions and
processes of politics, of substantive issues, and of political leaders and parties. By using
a combination of knowledge in politics we will be able to capture the larger pattern of
what people know (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Interest will be gauged by self-
reported interest in the campaign. I will only consider interest in the campaign as appose
to interest in politics in general because it is this that may help one in seeing beyond the
incumbent’s message. As with interest, exposure will be assessed by considering
exposure to the campaign and will be measured by using a combination of questions
including frequency of watching television new stories about the election, reading
newspapers about the election and discussion about the election with family and friends.
Partisan strength will be measured using self-reported strength of partisan identification.
In measuring strength of the dominant message I will use the ratio of total spending

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3 Due to the limits of data and statistical skill of the researcher, the analysis in this paper will include only
one measure of knowledge – identification of party holding the majority in the House. Other knowledge
questions on the NES include identification of political figures – Al Gore, Neut Gingrich, William
Rehnquist, and Boris Yeltsin. I chose not to use these as they represent different levels of political
awareness (Gore should be better known than Rehnquist or Yeltsin) and did not know which would be the
best measure. Another question testing knowledge on the NES is identification of the respondent’s
incumbent House candidate. I chose not to use this because it is likely to be highly correlated with ticket
splitting.

4 Others considering interest’s effect on seeing beyond the dominant message also consider interest in the
context of the issue being studied (Beck et al. 1992; Krosnick and Brannon 1993).

5 Analysis in this draft will use a different measure of exposure – time spent following government and
public affairs as well as the question as to discussion with family and friends.

6 Due to limitations of the researcher’s statistical skills, analysis in this draft will not consider partisan
strength. We will have to rely on prior work that has shown a relation between awareness and ticket
splitting independent of partisan strength.
accounted for by the highest spender – most likely the incumbent.\textsuperscript{7} Ratio of spending has been used in other studies (Zaller 1992) and, bar analysis of local media in every district, is the best approximation for how one-sided an information environment is.

**Findings**

I will first look at the individual effects of knowledge, interest, and exposure on split-ticket voting. There is no relation between knowledge of which party has the majority in the House and ticket splitting. Those who were able to name Republicans as the party with the majority in the House were less likely to split a ticket, but the relationship is not significant (see Table 1). To the extent that knowledge of which party has the majority in the House is a reliable measure, we can conclude that political knowledge is not a sufficient predictor of ticket splitting in House elections.

Interest, however, seems to be a good predictor of split-ticket voting. The relationship between interest and ticket splitting is negative and significant. Table 2 shows that those who report being very interested in the campaign are less likely to split a ticket than those somewhat interested and those somewhat interested are less likely to split a ticket than those with not much interest are.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Tabulation of Split-ticket Voting by Knowledge of Majority in House of Representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Split ticket</td>
<td>Correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>639 (82.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>134 (17.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 926</td>
<td>Pearson chi2 = .7469 Pr = 0.387 Note: Colum percentages in parentheses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Tabulation of Split-ticket Voting by Level of Interest in Political Campaign, 1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Split ticket</td>
<td>Very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>335 (88.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45 (11.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 926</td>
<td>Pearson Chi2 = 21.1797 Pr = 0.000 Note: Colum percentages in parentheses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two measures are used to measure exposure to politics. The first is time spent following government and public affairs. The relationship between following government and ticket splitting is negative and significant. Table 3 shows that those who spend more time following government are less likely to split a ticket. I have also considered time spent following government and frequency of discussion about politics with family and friends (the second measure of exposure) as ratio variables with possible values of 1 to 4 and 1 to 8, respectively. Comparing mean scores for time spent following government and frequency of discussion we see that there is a significant relation for both (see Table 4). Those who spent more time following government and talking with friends and family about politics are less likely to split a ticket. This confirms our findings in Table 3 and exposure to politics, like interest in politics, seems to be a reliable predictor of ticket splitting.

\textsuperscript{7} Due to data limitations, analysis in this draft will not consider differences in information environments.
The findings thus far have looked at the independent effects of knowledge, interest, and exposure on ticket splitting. We will now look at the effects that combinations of the components have. I have hypothesized that neither political knowledge nor interest in politics will experience the same strength (or weakness in the case of political knowledge) of association with ticket splitting without the help of political exposure.

I will first look at the effects of political knowledge controlling for exposure. Exposure is measured by time spent following government and public affairs, which has four possible values. When we control for exposure, the effects of political knowledge on split-ticket voting take a different look. Where knowledge was not related to ticket splitting on its own, when we knowledge at different levels of exposure we find some relation (see Table 5). Those who have high levels of exposure and are able to place Republicans as the majority in the House are less likely to split a ticket. The relationship disappears for those with lower levels of exposure with chi-square statistics and p values of, in descending order, 0.6441 & 0.422; 0.1672 & 0.683; 0.0311 & 0.860 (tabulations not shown). These findings suggest that knowledge, while not a reliable predictor of ticket splitting when looked at by its self, may help in receiving the challenger’s message when accompanied by high levels of exposure.

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8 Cell totals exceed six for all levels of exposure.
The dependence that political knowledge has on exposure does not appear for interest in politics. Comparing the effect of interest in politics on split-ticket voting at different levels of political exposure does not provide a considerable evidence of dependence. Table 6 reports the chi-square statistics and p values.\(^9\) Controlling for exposure, the relation between interest and split-ticket voting looses much of its statistical significance. This is curious in that both interest and exposure have strong relations with ticket splitting when considering each separately. One would expect that controlling for one, the other would retain its relationship. This may be due to the low number of cases within cells. Looking at the P values we see that for those who follow government most of the time, sometimes, and now and then there is a stronger relationship, but it still does not reach standard levels of significant.

Table 6 shows levels of exposure to politics, not levels of interest. For each of the four tabulations looking at interest and ticket splitting by levels of exposure, the direction of the relationship, though not significant, is as hypothesized. Those with higher levels of exposure and interest are less likely to split a ticket.

\(^9\) Table 6 shows levels of exposure to politics, not levels of interest. For each of the four tabulations looking at interest and ticket splitting by levels of exposure, the direction of the relationship, though not significant, is as hypothesized. Those with higher levels of exposure and interest are less likely to split a ticket.
Table 7
Tabulation of Split-ticket Voting by Interest in Government for Those With High Levels of Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verymuch</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Notmuch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Split</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.46)</td>
<td>(20.72)</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(88.54)</td>
<td>(79.28)</td>
<td>(75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi2 = 11.78  P = .003
Note: Colum percentages in parentheses

Table 8
Tabulation of Split-ticket Voting by Interest in Government for Those With Low Levels of Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verymuch</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Notmuch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Split</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16.13)</td>
<td>(19.75)</td>
<td>(33.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(83.87)</td>
<td>(80.25)</td>
<td>(66.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi2 = 5.43  P = .07
Note: Colum percentage in parentheses

Discussion
We have looked at the relationship between split-ticket voting and knowledge of politics, interest in politics and exposure to politics. Looking at the three measures by them selves, knowledge of politics does not seem to be related to ticket splitting, while interest and exposure are. I have hypothesized that exposure will be needed for either knowledge or interest to have an effect on ticket splitting. This seems to be the case with political knowledge. Those with high levels of knowledge and exposure are less likely to split a ticket while those with high levels of knowledge, but low levels of exposure are not. The reliance on exposure is not as clear for those with high levels of interest. Both those with high and low levels of exposure coupled with high levels of interest were less likely to split a ticket, though this was the case more so for those with high levels of exposure.

The findings suggest that researchers studying political awareness be more cautious in their use of measures. Combining individual components of political awareness may hide individual effects of different components, particularly political knowledge. The results support other work that has found political knowledge to not always play a large role in seeing beyond a dominant message. This is particularly important when researchers draw normative concussions based solely on one’s level of knowledge.

Bibliography


