

Direct Democracy and Political Extremism

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Abstract

An extensive debate exists regarding the causes of increasing polarization in politics. Mostly absent from this discourse, however, is the role played by political institutions. We examine the influence of direct democracy on voter behavior in legislative elections. Popular initiatives allow voters to set the political agenda, so that their preferred policies are more likely to be instituted. Thus, candidates' positions over issues become comparatively less relevant, resulting in improved election prospects of ideologically moderate and high valence candidates. Our empirical results utilizing state legislative elections in the United States between 2002 and 2010 show that in states with direct democracy, candidates with extremist ideology indeed receive fewer votes than in purely representative states. Furthermore, highly educated candidates tend to receive relatively higher vote shares under direct democratic regimes.