

RESEARCH NOTE



# Voters and the Personal Vote: A Counterfactual Simulation

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Electoral formulas and campaign practices in some nations encourage voters to consider the personal qualifications of candidates for legislative office, whereas individuating information about candidates is unavailable to voters in other nations. Where electoral rules and elite behavior foster the personal vote, the personal vote flourishes. However, it is unclear why voters respond to personal information about candidates. We test two competing hypotheses: that the personal vote reflects a general human tendency to attend to information regarding individuals' personal qualifications; and that the personal vote is an acquired behavior that emerges after voters are socialized to attend to personal information about candidates. We use counterfactual simulations to test these hypotheses. Specifically, we conduct laboratory experiments in which subjects drawn from Mexico and Venezuela—nations in which electoral rules ensure that the personal vote does not flourish—are provided the opportunity to consider candidates' personal qualifications. Results are consistent with the hypothesis that the personal vote stems from a general tendency in human decision making.

Electoral systems vary in the extent to which they foster candidate-centered campaigns and elections (Carey and Shugart 1995). In the United States, individuating information about candidates is plentiful, and voters respond to that information. Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987, 9) define *the personal vote* as "that portion of a candidate's electoral support which originates in his or her personal qualities, qualifications, activities, and record." Operationalizing the personal vote with data on constituency service, Cain and his colleagues demonstrate the importance of the personal vote in U.S. House elections. Related research on American legislative elections has established that a legislator's involvement in scandal adversely affects future electoral performance (e.g., Abramowitz 1991;

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Funk 1996; Peters and Welch 1980), and, more broadly, that a relationship exists between incumbents' levels of competence and integrity, and electoral success (e.g., Kulisheck and Mondak 1996; Luttbeg 1992; McCurley and Mondak 1995; Mondak 1995a).

Our interest is in exploring the prerequisites of the personal vote. Three requirements must be met for a personal vote to exist. First, a nation's electoral formulas must allow for the personal vote. This requirement clearly is met in U.S. elections. With partisan primaries, single-member districts, and a relatively weak party system, electoral rules in the United States pose no obstacle to a personal vote. Second, individuating information about candidates must be disseminated to voters. Where electoral rules do not preclude a personal vote, legislative candidates and scandal-hungry media have an incentive to ensure that personal information reaches voters. Hence, in nations such as the United States, this second requirement typically will be met. Third, regardless of electoral rules and the campaign practices of candidates and journalists, a personal vote will not exist unless voters add personal information about candidates to the decision calculus. We focus on this third issue here. We are interested in whether voting on the basis of a candidate's personal characteristics reflects a general human tendency to prioritize individuating information, or, in contrast, whether such voting constitutes an acquired behavior that emerges only if voters have been socialized to view personal information as important.

Several researchers have posited that it is both natural and rational for voters to attend to personal information about candidates (e.g., McCurley and Mondak 1995; Popkin 1991; Sullivan et al. 1990). Two factors underlie this perspective. First, people regularly assess the competence and integrity of other people, and we tend to be adept at doing so. Applied to the political arena, decision making may be more efficient when voters evaluate candidates partly on the basis of their personal attributes rather than solely on the basis of esoteric or ambiguous policy stances. Second, personal traits are relevant considerations. Voters should prefer that representatives be competent rather than incompetent, honest rather than dishonest, and attentive to constituents rather than inattentive.

Although several analysts have argued that voters will respond to candidate-specific information where possible, we should not assume this view to be correct absent corroborating evidence. An alternate to this perspective is that the personal vote reflects learned behavior that emerges only because it is encouraged by certain media practices, and cultivated by political candidates. This view suggests that rational voters prefer to choose between competing candidates solely on the basis of *impersonal* criteria such as ideology, partisanship, and policy positions. Where a personal vote exists, it does so because candidates and media have emphasized personal factors over political ones. Voters are encouraged to examine personal information, and they may be given little opportunity to do otherwise.

Determining which of these views best accounts for the personal vote is important on two levels. First, on a micro level, exploration of the origins of the personal vote may improve our understanding of the psychology of electoral decision making. In at least some elections, voters do consider personal information about the candidates. Does this behavior reflect citizens functioning as competent and expedient decisionmakers, or does it signal an electorate deprived of substantive information and induced against its collective will to vote on the basis of tangential personal considerations?

Second, on a macro level, insight regarding the foundations of the personal vote may help us to foresee the effects of electoral reform. In those countries that have moved to make elections more candidate centered, the short-term implications of such changes will vary depending on whether voters must be socialized to form their decisions partly on the basis of candidates' personal traits. We know that electoral rules congenial to the personal vote and the dissemination of personal information about candidates are *necessary* conditions for the personal vote to exist. Voters are precluded from acting on personal information if such information never reaches voters. But it is not clear that adoption of favorable rules and the subsequent dissemination of personal information by candidates and media are *sufficient* for a personal vote to emerge. Indeed, these factors would not be sufficient if voters must learn to attend to candidate-specific information. In this scenario, new electoral rules would pave the way for voters to see information about the personal qualities of candidates, but voters might not immediately recognize such information as being pertinent to electoral choice.

What would constitute a critical test of the competing perspectives we have outlined? In any scenario in which the question is whether a behavior is natural or acquired, the defining test is straightforward: select subjects who have not previously engaged in the behavior in question, and see whether, when given the opportunity, they engage in that behavior. Suppose, for example, that you purchase a golden retriever. If you tell the dog to roll over, she will respond with a blank stare. Rolling over is a learned behavior. But if you toss the dog into a pool, she will swim. For dogs, swimming is an innate behavior.

We require an inherently artificial, or counterfactual, research design. We must pluck voters from contexts in which electoral rules dictate that the personal vote is not prevalent, and then determine whether they act on individuating information about candidates when provided the opportunity. Kulisheck and Mondak (1996) reported a laboratory experiment in which college students were exposed to information regarding the competence and integrity of hypothetical U.S. House candidates. Given the candidate-centered nature of U.S. elections, it is not surprising that the effects were positive. We replicate this research design, but with subjects drawn from two nations—Mexico and Venezuela—in which electoral rules severely limit exposure to information about candidates' personal characteristics. This means that our experiment simulates electoral reform in the

sense that voters in our laboratory experienced the consequences of a new set of rules—clear personal information about political candidates was now available. Our empirical question thus is quite simple: will Mexican and Venezuelan subjects behave like the previous U.S. sample, or will they ignore the unfamiliar candidate-specific information?

### STUDY DESIGN

Our experiments were conducted in Venezuela and Mexico in 1995. In this section, we will provide a brief outline of the Mexican and Venezuelan electoral contexts, followed by discussion of the procedures and manipulations used in the experiments.

#### *Mexico and Venezuela*

Mexico and Venezuela are appropriate choices for present purposes provided that extant electoral structures and campaign practices limit the personal vote in those nations. If this prerequisite is met, then experimental study will permit us to determine how Mexican and Venezuelan subjects respond to an unfamiliar form of information. We believe that Mexico and Venezuela provide viable contexts for the research question we have outlined.<sup>1</sup>

In Mexico, our experiment centers on the Assembly of Representatives of the Federal District (local), and the Chamber of Deputies (national). Party selection of candidates in Mexico greatly limits the role of a candidate's personal reputation. Indeed, Carey and Shugart (1995: 426) offer the Mexican system as an example of an electoral formula in which personal reputation is unimportant. In Mexico, an added factor is that the nation imposes a one-term limit on service in legislative posts (i.e., no legislator can be elected to consecutive terms in the same office). Term limits were implemented in Mexico to maximize the power of party leaders, and especially leaders of the nation's dominant party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). Term limits strike two blows against the personal vote. First, self-interested elected officials have no immediate incentive to cultivate a personal reputation because reelection is a legal impossibility. Indeed, the central assumption of the personal vote thesis is that legislators are motivated by the desire to secure reelection (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). This motivation is absent in Mexico. Second, term limits in Mexico foster unflinching party loyalty, meaning that there is a disincentive for the legislator to cultivate personal

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<sup>1</sup> Although Mexico and Venezuela are appropriate contexts for present purposes, so too are many other nations. Familiarity and convenience also affected our decision to run our experiments in Mexico and Venezuela. Two of us are natives of Latin America; at the time this paper's experiments were conducted, one of us was engaged in other research in Venezuela, and the other was teaching in Mexico.

support: the career-minded politician will not risk actions that run contrary to the wishes of party leaders.

The bottom line is that Mexico's electoral system creates strong barriers to the personal vote. Former candidates are sometimes recycled, and some politicians do rotate among offices. Thus voters may, from time to time, be able to recall a candidate's past performance in office. But aside from such distant recollections, the personal vote is not a factor in Mexico. Mexico offers a research context in which nonpersonal criteria function as central determinants of electoral outcomes. The hypothetical elections contested in our laboratory likely marked the first instance in which our subjects enjoyed a meaningful opportunity to vote on the basis of candidates' personal qualities.

Venezuela's electoral formulas allow slightly greater room for a personal vote than do Mexico's, but only because of changes implemented recently. We focus on the Chamber of Deputies (national) and the District Council (local). Until 1993, Venezuela used closed, blocked lists for the Chamber of Deputies. A candidate's personal reputation is of no consequence under such a formula, because voters select from between party lists, and voters have no option to add or delete names, or to change the order in which the names appear on the ballot (Carey and Shugart 1995; Carey 1996). Crisp (1998: 24) notes that in Venezuela this structure resulted in "nearly lock-step party discipline." A similar system was used in elections for the District Council until 1989.

In 1993, Venezuela implemented a mixed formula for the Chamber of Deputies; each voter can cast a ballot for a candidate in a single-member district, and also for a party slate (Ellner 1993-94; Kulisheck and Canache 1998). Voters were permitted to split their ballots in elections for the District Council in 1989, and a mixed system (two-thirds of Council elected in single-member districts, one-third proportional representation) was implemented in 1992 (Ellner 1993-94). Because our experiment was conducted after Venezuela's initial mixed-system election, subjects had little real-world experience in evaluating candidates' personal qualities. The most vital information—how well legislators have performed in office—is not available for the first election held under a new formula.

At the time our data were gathered, the personal qualities of political candidates had not yet played a meaningful role in actual legislative elections in Mexico and Venezuela. By drawing experimental subjects from these contexts, we can determine if, given a favorable decision-making climate, voters will attend to individuating information about legislative candidates.

### *Procedure*

Procedures followed those used by Kulisheck and Mondak (1996). The 130 participants in Venezuela were students at two universities in Caracas, Universidad Católica Andrés Bello and Universidad Simón Bolívar. We have 155 participants from Mexico, and they were students at Universidad de las Américas,

Universidad Autónoma de Méjico-Xochimilco, and Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica de Méjico. As noted above, each student was provided data regarding two hypothetical legislative elections, one national and one local. All renditions of the experiment followed a  $3 \times 3$  between-subjects design, with manipulations used to vary descriptions of the competence and integrity of candidates. Students were assigned randomly to treatment conditions.

Experiments were run during regular class sessions. Students were read an opening statement that explained the study as an inquiry regarding how media might improve election coverage. Students were told that they would read information about hypothetical candidates for two offices, and assess the utility of that information. After the opening statement, participants completed a demographic survey (age, sex, whether registered to vote, ideology, etc.). Next, they read descriptions of the first pair of candidates. The descriptions resembled “Meet the Candidates” stories published by many U.S. newspapers. Information about the two candidates appeared in parallel columns, enabling direct comparison. The stories first presented background information (name, education, occupation, family, and political affiliation), then quotes from the hypothetical candidates explaining their positions on crime, health care, and inflation, and finally information regarding the candidates’ levels of competence and integrity. The competence and integrity evaluations were attributed to a fictitious nonpartisan political organization, *Por un Voto Consciente*. Each candidate was rated separately on competence and integrity (high, adequate, low). Students were asked to read the information regarding the first pair of candidates, answer a series of questions (which candidate they would vote for in an actual election; which candidate they preferred on the issues of crime, health care, and inflation; whether the news story provided adequate information), and then repeat the process for the second pair of candidates. Upon completion of the study, participants were explained the project’s specific purpose.

Manipulations centered on the competence and integrity of the first candidate (“Candidate A”) in each election. All other information was held constant, including evaluations of the competence and integrity of the second candidate in each election (competence and integrity both held at adequate). The manipulations were intended to be subtle. Many information-processing experiments employ dramatic manipulations. For instance, studies on the effects of source credibility may depict a message’s source as either a high school student or a Nobel Prize winner, or other comparable extremes. In contrast with such an approach, we sought to present clear information about competence and integrity, but to do so in a manner that would not overwhelm the experiments’ participants. In other words, we wanted to give the participants every opportunity to choose between the two candidates on the basis of criteria other than competence and integrity. Toward this end, we placed the competence and integrity information last within the hypothetical news stories, after extensive background and policy information. Further, the competence and integrity

evaluations used a simple three-category typology, and little definitional detail was offered regarding the organization *Por un Voto Consciente*.

Although the personal vote includes factors in addition to competence and integrity, we limited our focus to these traits. One reason we did so stems from the limits of experimental designs. In the laboratory, we can capture features of real-world decision-making contexts while simultaneously creating counterfactual contexts. Still, manipulations must be plausible. Information about competence and integrity can be varied quite easily even for hypothetical candidates. In contrast, it would be much more difficult to manipulate other components of the personal vote, such as a voter's familiarity with a candidate's record of constituency service. The second reason we focus on competence and integrity is to bring comparability with past research conducted in the United States. Our study replicates a laboratory experiment focused on voting in U.S. House elections (Kulisheck and Mondak 1996). Hence, in addition to contrasts between Mexico and Venezuela, we will be able to broaden the scope of comparison by discussing similarities and differences in findings from three electoral contexts.

We use the laboratory experiment to create and study a counterfactual decisionmaking environment. This inherent artificiality—coupled with our use of nonrepresentative samples—clearly demands that our findings be viewed as only suggestive, not conclusive. Fortunately, the pattern of results reported below is straightforward and consistent, offering a revealing new perspective on the nature of the personal vote.

## RESULTS

Because the experiments systematically varied information regarding competence and integrity, estimation of possible direct effects requires only that we include the manipulations as independent variables in models of the vote choice. Competence and integrity are coded 1 (low) to 3 (high). The dependent variable in our analyses, the vote, is dichotomous (1 = respondent voted for candidate A; 0 = respondent voted for candidate B); hence, we explore the impact of these personal qualities through estimation of a series of logistic regression models. We will report four models, because parallel experiments were conducted concerning local and national elections in both Mexico and Venezuela.

Each of the logit models includes two control variables designed to capture nonpersonal elements of electoral choice. The first is Issue Proximity (6 = respondent strongly favors the positions of Candidate A on the issues of crime, health care, and inflation, to -6 = respondent strongly favors the positions of candidate B on these issues).<sup>2</sup> The second control variable is ideology. Subjects may

<sup>2</sup> The initial scales for each issue ranged from 1 (e.g., subject strongly prefers candidate A's position on crime) to 5 (subject strongly prefers candidate B). We rescaled these items to range from 2 to -2, and then summed scores across the three issues.

have been able to elicit ideological cues from the information about the candidates, a possibility we test through inclusion of self-reported ideology in the logit models (1 = left, to 10 = right).

We expect positive coefficients for our central independent variables, Competence and Integrity. Such results would indicate that the likelihood that a participant voted for candidate A in a given hypothetical election increased as descriptions of the two qualitative traits were varied from low, to adequate, to high. The measures of issue proximity also should produce positive coefficients, meaning that participants are expected to support those candidates whose positions they favor on the issues of crime, health care, and inflation.

Logit estimates are depicted in Table 1. The data reveal that information about the candidates' levels of competence and integrity did influence participants' decisions regarding which candidates to support. The quality variables produce statistically significant effects in six of eight tests (five at  $p < .05$ , one at  $p < .10$ ), the only exceptions being competence in the Mexican national election and integrity in the Venezuelan local contest. Voters previously unaccustomed to adding personal information about candidates to the decision calculus did so upon exposure to such information.

The emergence of significant effects for the candidate quality variables allows us to consider several more specific questions. First, are there any systematic differences between results for Mexico and Venezuela, or results for the national and local elections? Although we can speak to these questions only tentatively, the answer in each case appears to be no. The coefficients for competence and integrity vary in size across our four hypothetical elections, but this variance seems unsystematic. For instance, the largest effects in Mexico are for the local election, but in Venezuela competence and integrity bring the greatest joint influence in the national contest. Conversely, the only insignificant coefficients emerge in the national election in Mexico and the local election in Venezuela. Candidate quality seemingly does not exert precisely the same level of influence among all electorates, but current results reveal no conclusive indication that the observed variance is anything but idiosyncratic.

A second question is how our results compare with those found in the United States. Recall that our study is modeled on research concerning U.S. House elections (Kulisheck and Mondak 1996). We have seen in Table 1 that six of the eight coefficients for competence and integrity achieve statistical significance; the mean value of the coefficients is .521. Results in the United States were very similar. Five of six coefficients for the candidate quality variables were statistically significant in the U.S. experiments, and the mean value of the coefficients was .403 (Kulisheck and Mondak 1996: Table 2). Hence, laboratory experiments conducted using three quite different samples have yielded consistent evidence regarding the impact of candidate quality on the vote choice in legislative elections.

A third question concerns the substantive magnitude of the effects of competence



TABLE 1  
 COMPETENCE, INTEGRITY, AND THE VOTE CHOICE: LOGIT ESTIMATES

	Mexico		Venezuela	
	Deputy (national office)	Council (local office)	Deputy (national office)	Council (local office)
Constant	-2.387* (2.513)	-2.777** (2.206)	-1.152 (1.071)	-2.870* (2.126)
Issue Proximity	0.800*** (5.422)	1.509*** (5.627)	0.741*** (5.282)	0.976*** (5.373)
Ideology	0.088 (0.845)	-0.233# (1.670)	-0.310* (2.034)	0.269 (1.590)
Competence	-0.001 (0.003)	0.942** (2.589)	0.545* (1.915)	0.657* (2.002)
Integrity	0.329# (1.320)	1.006** (2.799)	0.622* (2.196)	0.070 (0.215)
Number of Cases	155	153	130	128
Model Chi-Square	56.992	124.296	55.696	74.710

Note: Cell entries are coefficient estimates from logistic regression models in which the dependent variable is the vote choice (1 = respondent voted for candidate A; 0 = respondent voted for candidate B); t-values are in parentheses (one-tailed tests are used for issue proximity, competence, and integrity).

#p < .10  
 \*p < .05  
 \*\*p < .01  
 \*\*\*p < .001

and integrity. To address this issue, we calculate the estimated likelihood of a vote for candidate A in each experiment across the three levels of competence and integrity, while holding the control variables at their means. The results are depicted in Table 2. The largest effect occurs for integrity in the local election in Mexico, where the estimated likelihood of a vote for candidate A increases from .249 to .712 across the three values of integrity, a swing of over 45 points. The quality variables produce average swings of 24 points.

Subjects in our experiments were drawn from electoral contexts in which the personal vote is rare, and yet these subjects responded strongly to information regarding candidates' levels of competence and integrity. Indeed, the substantive magnitude of current results equals what Kulisheck and Mondak reported in tests conducted in the United States. Current findings clearly are more consistent with the hypothesis that attention to personal characteristics is a general component of human decision making than with the hypothesis that the personal vote is an acquired behavior that flourishes over time given cultivation by political candidates

≡ TABLE 2.  
ESTIMATED LIKELIHOOD OF VOTE FOR CANDIDATE A AS A FUNCTION OF  
COMPETENCE AND INTEGRITY

	Mexico		Venezuela	
	Deputy (national office)	Council (local office)	Deputy (national office)	Council (local office)
Competence				
High	.300	.699	.747	.490
Adequate	.300	.475	.634	.332
Low	.300	.261	.498	.205
Integrity				
High	.373	.712	.762	.348
Adequate	.300	.475	.632	.332
Low	.235	.249	.479	.317

Source: Table 1.

Note: Cell entries indicate the estimated likelihood of voting for candidate A, with issue proximity and ideology held at their mean values. In calculating estimates for Competence, the values of Integrity is held at 2 (adequate); likewise, in calculating estimates for Integrity, the value of Competence is held at 2 (adequate).

and news media. No socialization was necessary for participants in the experiments to respond to information about a candidate's competence and integrity.

The skeptic might counter that we offered experimental subjects no choice but to respond to our manipulations. We have several comments on this point. First, the manipulations were subtle. Participants were exposed to a great deal of information regarding the candidates, including the candidates' stances on three salient policy issues. The information about competence and integrity was brief, and it was presented without explanatory detail. Second, because the manipulations were subtle, it was possible for participants to ignore the information about competence and integrity. Issue proximity yielded substantively greater effects than did competence and integrity in each election, and ideology also produced statistically significant effects in two of the hypothetical contests. Further, the candidate quality variables produced two null results in eight tests, meaning that some participants could and did ignore our manipulations. Third, if learning contributes to the personal vote, then current results should have been weaker than those reported in the United States. That is, even if the laboratory design ensures the detection of positive effects—a claim we reject—it does not follow that those effects should be as strong in Mexico and Venezuela as in the United States.

Our final response requires an added empirical test. If subjects reacted to the manipulations because the study's design gave them no other choice, then it

follows that the manipulations should have been most influential for those subjects for whom issues and ideology were unrevealing. For example, a person who strongly preferred one candidate to another on the issues had the opportunity to ignore our manipulations, and to decide how to vote solely on the issues. If subjects who could have ignored information about competence and integrity did not do so, we would reject the possibility that our core results are an artifact of this study's experimental design. Tests on this point require that we fold our measures of issue proximity and ideology, and then interact these new variables with competence and integrity. The folded issue variable ranges from 0 (subject prefers the two candidates equally on the issues) to 6 (respondent strongly prefers one candidate to the other on all issues). The folded ideology variable ranges from 1 (subject is a self-identified centrist) to 5 (subject is strongly liberal or strongly conservative). Separate models were estimated for issue distinctiveness and ideology. The models were of the form:

$$\text{Vote} = a + b_1\text{Issue Proximity} + b_2\text{Ideology} + b_3\text{Competence} + b_4\text{Integrity} + b_5\text{Issue Distinction} + b_6(\text{Issue Distinction} \times \text{Competence}) + b_7(\text{Issue Distinction} \times \text{Integrity}).$$

Statistically significant negative coefficients on the interaction terms would indicate that the impact of competence and integrity weakened for subjects who were most able to distinguish between candidates on the basis of issue positions or ideology. These tests produced 16 interaction terms across our four elections. None of the 16 interactions yielded a significant negative effect, and in no instance was model performance enhanced through inclusion of the new variables. In short, the effects of the competence and integrity manipulations were constant for all subjects. It is not the case that our manipulations produced effects only for participants who had no other means to decide which candidate to support.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Voters seemingly enjoy little choice on the matter of a personal vote. In the United States, the candidate-centered nature of campaigns means that voters often have no option but to consider information regarding the personal qualifications of candidates. Elsewhere, in contrast, electoral formulas in some nations are such that voters never receive, and thus cannot consider, this same form of information. In this paper, we have sought to determine how voters would respond if they were free to attend to, or to ignore, individuating information about candidates. To pursue this question, we have had to construct an inherently counterfactual research context. By drawing subjects from Mexico and Venezuela, we could examine whether information about candidates' personal qualifications resonates with voters who have not previously been socialized to view such information as important.

Results of our experiments are consistent with the hypothesis that the personal vote reflects a general tendency in human decision making. We are all much more practiced at evaluating people as people rather than as policymakers. Therefore, provided that the requisite information is available, we prefer to judge political candidates partly on the basis of their personal qualifications. In our laboratory studies, Mexican and Venezuelan subjects responded to our manipulations of information regarding the competence and integrity of political candidates. Rather than ignoring this information, our subjects took it into account. Moreover, the impact of competence and integrity in Mexico and Venezuela equaled effects previously found in the United States, suggesting that political socialization determines neither the existence nor perhaps even the magnitude of the personal vote. Coupled with evidence that the particular personal traits voters emphasize are common cross-nationally (e.g., Bean and Mughan 1989; Pancer, Brown and Barr 1999), current results support the conclusion that candidates' levels of competence and integrity are central components of the voter's decision calculus across a wide array of electoral contexts.

Our results suggest a clear implication regarding the importance of electoral rules: *if voters inherently prefer to consider personal information when evaluating candidates, then it follows that the presence of a personal vote in a given electoral context hinges on the existence of congenial electoral rules.* In Mexico, for example, the virtual absence of a personal vote reflects not the choice of voters to ignore individuating information, but rather the impact of party-centered electoral formulas. Voters view the competence and integrity of candidates to be meaningful considerations, but these considerations are neutralized in electoral systems in which the qualifications—and sometimes even the names and faces—of individual candidates never reach the voters.

Insight regarding the nature of the personal vote helps us to understand not only how voters vote, but also how well. Research conducted in the United States suggests that term limits would disrupt the efforts of voters to screen incumbents on the basis of competence and integrity, and thus would diminish the aggregate quality of representation (Mondak 1995b). This same logic would appear to hold with even greater power in those nations in which electoral formulas minimize or fully preclude the personal vote. Where voters are unable to screen candidates on the basis of personal qualifications, the system includes no mechanism to foster either the retention of superior incumbents or the eviction of inferior ones. In Mexico, for example, party selection of candidates coupled with the nation's one-term limit means that quality is irrelevant. It makes all the difference if a person is a PRI candidate. It makes no difference whatsoever if a person is a good or bad PRI candidate.

Because voters apparently will attend to candidate-specific information when given the opportunity to do so, our results suggest that electoral reforms designed to weaken party control over the campaign process will succeed in

altering the nature of electoral choice. Venezuela is a case in point. Recent electoral reforms in Venezuela have diminished party control over candidate selection, ceding greater power to the electorate (e.g., Ellner 1993-94; Kulisheck and Canache 1998; Shugart 1992). By weakening party control, electoral reforms in Venezuela potentially facilitate the emergence of a stronger personal vote. Our results suggest that Venezuelans are receptive to personal information about legislative candidates. Because the nation's changing electoral structure will promote the availability of such information, we foresee an increasing role for the personal vote in future elections.

Given the rarity of the laboratory experiment in comparative political studies, a few final words about the method we have used are in order. We believe that laboratory research can help to broaden understanding of electoral choice. We also feel that experiments (and other simulation techniques such as mathematical models) should be viewed as complements to observational methods. In that we have simulated electoral decision making in a counterfactual setting, our purpose clearly has not been to observe how Mexicans and Venezuelans vote. Instead, we have used the experiment to gain leverage on a fundamental question of process. Laboratory research is highly useful for such purposes, and thus we feel that the experiment can contribute to a multifaceted cross-national research program.

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