

CANADIAN JOURNAL of URBAN RESEARCH

REVUE CANADIENNE de RECHERCHE URBAINE

Does political information influence voter turnout at the municipal level?

Sandra Breux

Institut National de Recherche Scientifique, Centre Urbanisation Culture et Société

Jérôme Couture

Département de science politique, Université Laval

Royce Koop*

Department of Political Studies, University of Manitoba

Abstract

Political information is key to political competence. The relationship between political information and the decision to vote, however, is understudied at the municipal level of government. Based on a survey of 3,200 electors in the province of Quebec, our results highlight the importance of information in voters' decision to go to the polls as well as how this information affects other variables. Our analysis shows that the more a voter is knowledgeable about the candidates' platforms and projects, the more likely he or she is to vote. Our findings extend knowledge regarding political information, political competence and turnout from other levels of government to the municipal level.

Keywords: political platform and projects informations, Quebec voters, voters knowledge of candidate

Résumé

Si l'information politique contribue à la formation de la compétence politique, peu de travaux analysent la relation entre l'information politique et la décision de se rendre aux urnes à l'échelle municipale. À partir d'une enquête menée auprès de 3 200 électeur·trice·s de la province de Québec, nous montrons d'une part l'importance que détient l'information chez les électeur·trice·s dans la décision d'aller voter et d'autre part la façon dont cette information est susceptible d'influencer d'autres variables. Notre analyse montre que plus un·e électeur·trice est informé·e sur les programmes et les projets des candidat·e·s, plus il·elle est susceptible de voter. Ces résultats élargissent ainsi plus largement les connaissances concernant l'information politique, la compétence politique et la participation électorale.

Mots-clés : information électorale des candidat·e·s, électeur·trice·s du Québec, connaissance des électeur·trice·s ses programmes et les projets des candidat·e·s

*Correspondence to: Royce Koop, Department of Political Studies, University of Manitoba, 532 Fletcher Argue, Winnipeg MB, R3T 2N2, email: royce.koop@umanitoba.ca

Canadian Journal of Urban Research, Summer 2022, Volume 31, Issue 1, pages 83–96.

Copyright © 2022 by the Institute of Urban Studies.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 2371-0292

Introduction

Information deficits are often cited as possible explanations for lower voter turnout (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2012). This relationship between information and turnout has been extensively studied for the upper levels of government, and has led to the development of the concepts of political sophistication (Dassonneville 2012) and political competence (Blondiaux 2007). Indeed, levels of political knowledge are considered a crucial indicator of voter competence (Dassonneville 2012).

However, while a recent study has clearly established a link between the nature of the information available and the choices made by voters at the polls (Crowder-Meyer, Kushner Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020), to our knowledge, no study has verified the impact of this specific informational context on individual voter turnout in local elections. In part, this is because electoral analyses at this level focus mainly on aggregate data, making it difficult for researchers to discern the relationship between the elector's choice of whether or not to vote and the political information available to them (Breux and Couture 2018). Nevertheless, municipal politics is an intriguing arena in which to study the relationship between information and turnout; for example, Cutler and Matthews argue that voters in municipal elections have less information than in other elections and that information is not well organized (2005, 360), which may help to explain comparably low voter turnout in local elections. How then can we understand the relationship between information and turnout in these peculiar elective settings?

Accordingly, we seek to explore the notion of political competence and its link with electoral participation at the municipal level of politics. Based on a survey of 3,200 electors in the province of Quebec, Canada, conducted in November 2017, we measure the relationship between municipal voter competence and voter turnout. We begin by addressing links between political competence and electoral participation, including existing concepts and measures. This then leads into a discussion of the specific context of municipal electoral participation and voters at this level of elections. Next, we present our methodological approach and the original information index we develop to measure voters' sense of being sufficiently informed about municipal politics. Our analysis highlights the importance of information in voters' decision to vote at the municipal level. Further, we demonstrate how information could be linked with other variables which shape electoral behaviour, notably home ownership, age, and involvement in political parties. We address our research findings by situating them within the relatively unique settings of municipal politics, and demonstrate that well-recognized influences on turnout and vote choices—such as information—must be understood within these local elective settings.

Political competence and electoral participation

The relationship between the voter's political competence and electoral participation has been extensively studied in political science. The abundance of studies is due in part to a seminal finding by pioneers in the field, namely that the elector is generally an uninformed individual (Campbell et al. 1960). The key studies on political competence brought forth an instrumental vision of political information in which information is considered a form of investment (Bimber 2001). According to Downs' model of rationality (1957), the voter can prioritize her or his preferences and vote according to the benefits it will bring. The model postulates that a voter will remain poorly informed, since the costs of acquiring political information exceed the benefits that can be expected.

Downs' expectations have been both supported and contradicted in subsequent research on information and voting. Most importantly, researchers have demonstrated the greater a citizen's level of political knowledge, the more likely she or he is to vote (Larcinese 2007). This assertion renders political competence "an individual disposition or attribute" (Blondiaux 2007, 761), a specific type of capacity. However, several studies in both Europe and North America have shown that socio-economic variables such as education and income play a significant role in such a relationship (Berggren 2001) and possibly even form the basis of the relationship (Lassen 2005). Information is a variable that is endogenous to other variables that may influence the decision to go to the polls. This finding has informed a body of research on the inequalities that this relationship generates within the electorate (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Gaxie 1978). Pantoja and Segura illustrate this inequality: "if politically knowledgeable citizens participate at higher levels, make better choices, and have more responsive representatives, then certain groups in the polity that have been shown to possess less information [...] are politically at disadvantage" (2003, 268).

Researchers have also demonstrated that context is a variable that can improve an individual's level of political knowledge. Indeed, the more political information that is disseminated, the lower the cost of voting will be for the

voter, increasing the probability that she or he will go to the polls. Availability of information is therefore crucial in shaping the decision of whether to vote. Research on the influence of context in this regard is divided into two parts. On the one hand, there is work that addresses the impact of election campaigns on mobilization (Dumitrescu 2012; Römmele 2003), highlighting the influence of both candidates and political parties (Chong and Druckman 2007). Trumm and Sudulich (2018), for example, argue that not all activities have an impact on electoral mobilization and that the type of elections is also important to consider. On the other hand, some studies highlight the role of the institutional and legislative context, and underline the importance of the rules surrounding campaign spending for levels of voter turnout (Baek 2009). For still others, some institutional contexts are seen to favor the political competence of citizens (Gordon and Segura 1997). Under certain conditions, the institutional context could possibly compensate for a lack of political knowledge on the part of the individual. According to Berggren, for example, “institutional arrangements apparently can offset the tendency to those with few resources to remain unsophisticated, in effect reducing the resource-bias in political sophistication” (2001, 547).

This research highlights the multiple interactions that can take place between the level of political knowledge and individual electoral participation, and make information a key element of this relationship. These multiple interactions have led to the development of a number of concepts and measures of political knowledge.

Concepts and measures

Several concepts have been devised by researchers to identify and assess political competence. One such concept is the notion of “political sophistication” by Neuman (1986), defined as the articulation between three concepts “political salience”, “political knowledge” and “political conceptualization.” For Luskin, “a person is politically sophisticated to the extent to which his or her political cognitions are numerous, cut a wide substantive swath, and are highly organized or ‘constrained’” (1990, 332). Others, in turn, speak of “political knowledge,” which Delli Carpini and Keeter define as the “range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory.” This notion of political knowledge is related to political sophistication. Indeed, as Delli Carpini and Keeter note, “a common conclusion in an increasing number of studies is that factual knowledge is the best single indicator of sophistication and its related concepts of ‘expertise,’ ‘awareness,’ ‘political engagement’ and even ‘media exposure’” (1993, 1180).

In yet another approach to assessing political competence, Zaller defines political awareness as the “extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered.” (1992, 21) For Zaller, political awareness is a way of analyzing the impact of information on individuals. This concept likewise has affinities with that of political knowledge: “much evidence indicates that simple tests of political knowledge are the most reliable and valid measures of political awareness.” (1991, 1233) Milner, for his part, considers civic literacy as a measure that combines “ability manifesting itself in the form of political knowledge, and willingness in the form of political participation.” (2002, 1)

This summary highlights the different ways in which the notion of political competence can be conceptualized. Despite their diversity, these different concepts also share a common feature: their measures, in addition to giving rise to debate, tends to resemble a knowledge test, which presents certain limitations.

Furthermore, exploring the influence of information on voting raises the question of the nature of the causality between these variables. Do electors inform themselves because they wish to vote or do they vote because they are informed? For some authors, whatever the causal direction between these variables, there is nonetheless:

[...] a correlation between the level of political competence, in the classical sense of the term, and the propensity to participate in politics, to give one’s opinions in surveys, or to vote. Statistically, political competence has to do with action. What matters is the relationship between competence and commitment [...] what matters is the relationship between competence and commitment. The more informed you are, the more likely you are to be politically engaged and vice versa” (Blondiaux 2007, 772).

Although relevant, previous surveys address competence and vote choice at the upper levels of government, with only a few focusing on the municipal level. This situation therefore calls for a more in-depth study of the mechanisms that can be applied at this lower level, where the specificity of the informational context is often mentioned, albeit without having been the subject of empirical tests.

Municipal electoral participation and information

Research on municipal electoral participation in North American is US centered (Breux and Bherer 2011; Breux and Couture 2018), although Canadian studies on this subject have increased in recent years. That said, the municipal electoral scenes in the two countries share similarities and so allow us to make several observations. More precisely, some factors that could explain voter turnout at others levels of government seem to matter differently at the municipal level. This seems particularly true where information is concerned.

Context may help explain voter turnout at the municipal level (Breux, Couture, and Bherer 2014; Trounstin 2009). The literature on municipal electoral participation demonstrates that socio-economic variables have less influence on mobilization at this level of government than at others. The weaker influence of these variables can be explained in part by environment in which individuals live. Some researchers, such as Oliver, Ha, and Callen (2012), have linked sizes of municipalities to the probability of voting: the smaller the size of the municipality, the greater the probability that an individual will go to the polls, since his or her vote can make a difference. Breux, Couture, and Goodman (2017) found a similar relationship in the Canadian province of Quebec. While municipality size plays a role in electoral mobilization, it also explains why the informational context is often used to explain low voter turnout, with the cost of political information being higher in the most populous, complex municipalities.

Other researchers have focused their attention on the characteristics of voters and how these affect likelihood to vote. These studies have found that municipal voters tend to be homeowners, older, more affluent and more educated than the average citizen (Rugh and Trounstin 2011). Home ownership facilitates access to information since municipal decisions are likely to influence both the value of the property and the tax bill (Oliver 2000). Residents' lived experience of public policies is also relevant, particularly in the context of property services, insofar as homeowners are more informed about public management (Couture, Breux and Bherer 2014).

Age is also an important variable in the decision to vote and, in fact, appears to exercise a stronger influence in local than federal or provincial elections. According to Stockemer and Rocher (2017), there is a 25-point difference in self-reported voting among those aged 18–24, compared to voters aged 25–34. This difference increases to 45 points when comparing self-reported voters aged 18–24 to self-reported voters aged 55 and older. In other terms, older individuals are more likely to vote at the municipal level. This finding was confirmed by Dostie-Goulet et al. (2013), who showed that young voters tend to abstain at the municipal level but vote at other levels, with the exception of those who had a strong sense of belonging to their municipality (also see Nakhaie 2006). Moreover, although Stockemer and Rocher (2017) demonstrated that political knowledge was an intermediate variable between age and propensity to vote, their analysis does not focus on the municipal level.

Other characteristics of the institutional and political context of municipal elections also influence electoral participation and the dissemination of information. The municipal level, for example, is known for its often high re-election rates. Trounstin (2008) points out that the dominance of one candidate during elections tends to reduce voter turnout and to lead to political monopolies when the same person is re-elected more than three times in a row. Since election results are largely predictable in these situations, voters have less incentive to go to the polls, as Bherer (2011) showed in her analysis of a city in Quebec. In such a context, it may be difficult for a newcomer to politics to make herself known, given the dominance of the incumbent candidate in the media and the electoral scene (see Breux, Couture, and Bherer 2014).

In Canada, two provinces differ from the others in that they both allow and supervise the formation of municipal political parties: Quebec and British Columbia (Couture, Breux, and Bherer 2018). The presence of political parties in Quebec, however, is rather minimal, despite having been legal for more than thirty years. Moreover, these municipal political parties rarely align with a clear ideological vision and instead present platforms that hardly differ from one another, rendering the municipal scene somewhat unintelligible. According to Bherer and Breux (2011), municipal politics in Quebec is characterized by an information deficit, which could help to explain low voter turnout:

[T]he municipal information deficit structures [...] the urban political field in a fundamental way. First of all, the lack of media coverage and the absence of political parties make it particularly costly for citizens to obtain information. Moreover, the modest knowledge of municipal competences and the low media coverage of local affairs (coming from the media or parties) suppress all forms of social pressure that might encourage citizens to vote. (p. 6)

Hypothesis

These previous findings suggest that the dissemination of information at the municipal level in Quebec is inadequate, and has consequences for voter turnout in local elections. Accordingly, we propose to test the following hypothesis: *Voters' political competence is associated with the likelihood they will vote in municipal elections.*

Testing this hypothesis is an important contribution to municipal election studies since, to our knowledge, this relationship has never been tested at the local level. In addition, testing this hypothesis also allows us to address some of the gaps identified by others in the measurement of political competence in previous studies (Blanchet 2016). Indeed, the notion of political competence and the studies that analyze it are not without their limitations. Very often, the measurement of political competence is similar to a knowledge test, putting the interviewee in a situation close to that of an exam (Blondiaux 2007), i.e. the interviewee is often asked for factual knowledge (for example, do you know the name of the finance minister?). Barabas et al (2014) also showed that the level of political knowledge depended greatly on the type of questions asked to the voter, thus putting the results of previous studies into perspective. Such evidence calls for a revision of the way political knowledge is measured.

Studies on health and voter turnout provide us with an opportunity to reflect on how to address this limitation. Such analyses often take an individual's self-assessment of his or her health status as an indicator of health: "Self-rated health assessed by a simple single-item measure has been demonstrated to be a robust predictor of health outcomes independent of many measurable physical and biological factors" (Mavaddat et al. 2011, 800). This research suggests that individuals' self-assessment of the level of political knowledge available to them—in other words, whether they feel sufficiently (or not) and adequately (or not) informed to make a choice during the election—could be an indicator of political competence regardless of factual knowledge. While this conclusion bears the risk of overestimating the individual's political competence (Fernbach et al. 2013), self-assessment by the individual allows, at least indirectly, for the diversity of individual realities to be taken into account.

Our research suggests that individuals' self-assessment of the level of political information available to them—in other words, whether they feel adequately informed to make a good choice in casting their ballot—could be linked to political competence regardless of factual knowledge. While this conclusion bears the risk of overestimating the individual's political competence (Fernbach et al. 2013), self-assessment by the individual allows, at least indirectly, for the diversity of individual realities to be taken into account. Moreover, this idea seems especially relevant given the knowledge that voters may vote with little political knowledge (Shineman, 2018).

This self-assessment is particularly relevant at the municipal level because studies of political competence tend to neglect existing interactions between candidates and citizens (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2014). It also seems that much more significant at the municipal level because the scale is often associated with a proximity between the elected official and the citizen (Mévellec 2018), whether this be real or idealized. Similarly, asking voters about their sense of being sufficiently informed avoids measuring their level of knowledge as such.

That is why we have created an information index based on three components which the voter self-assesses

- Knowledge of the candidates for elected office
- The responsibilities of municipalities
- The sense of being sufficiently informed.

These three aspects thus circumvent the need to subject electors to a knowledge test when seeking to assess their knowledge.

Such an index is similar to the notion of internal political efficacy, the set of "beliefs about one's own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics" (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991, 1407). This notion of internal political efficacy has also been the subject of reflection in relation to the question of information, often as part of the analysis of young voters' electoral participation. This constitutes "political information efficacy," which Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007, 1096) define as follows: "Our theory of political information efficacy is closely related to internal efficacy but differs in that it focuses solely on the voter's confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage the political process (to vote)". In their survey of young voters, Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco measure policy information effectiveness using four variables which measure perceptions of understanding, qualification, being self-informed, and being better informed than others.

The main determinants of political information as measured by index data (see regression Table 1) are, in order of importance, interest in politics (Beta: 0.37), ownership (Beta: 0.12), age (Beta: 0.11), presence of a political party

Table 1
Linear regression

| Dependant variable: Information index (scale 0-6) | Coef. (S.E.) | Beta* |
|--|---------------------|-------|
| Constant | 0.74*** (0.15) | - |
| Age | 0.01*** (0.001) | 0.11 |
| Gender (male) | 0.17** (0.06) | 0.05 |
| High school or less | -0.09 (0.08) | - |
| University degree | 0.14 (0.07) | - |
| \$50,000 and more | -0.04 (0.07) | - |
| Homeowner | 0.44*** (0.07) | 0.12 |
| Political party | 0.42*** (0.06) | 0.11 |
| Interest in politics | 1.37*** (0.0,06) | 0.37 |
| (n) | 3,126 | |
| Cluster for the category of size of the municipality | YES | |
| Pseudo-R2 | 0.26 | |

*Beta values are the estimated coefficients of the explanatory variables. They indicate a change in the dependent variable (in this case, information) caused by a unit change in the single independent variable while keeping all other independent variables constant.

(Beta: 0.11) and being male (Beta: 0.05). Education and income do not affect municipal political information, according to our results. In other words, the reason why owners tend to vote more is that they have more information. This relationship would also help explain why young people tend to abstain more at this level of government, being less likely to own property (Couture, Breux, and Bherer 2014).

While our information index can be likened to this political information efficacy, we have adapted it to the municipal context. This measure does not claim to be superior to existing traditional measures of political information; as Blondiaux points out, however, it has the advantage of participating in the diversification of “methodological access routes to politicization phenomena” (2007, 766), and of being able to encompass the diversity of the municipal contexts under study.

Methodology

Sample

A total of 561 mayoral elections were held during the Quebec municipal elections on November 5, 2017. Between November 9, 2017, and December 15, 2017, we conducted an online survey of voters in these municipalities, which were divided by population size into four strata. In total, we obtained 3,209 respondents, including 416 respondents in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, 726 respondents in municipalities with 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, 817 respondents in municipalities with 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, and 1,266 respondents in those with more than 100,000 inhabitants. We have complete data for all the variables under study for 3,126 respondents.

Survey instruments

Our dependent variable is voter turnout, which was measured by a question aimed at reducing the effect of social desirability according to recommendations by Morin-Chassé, Bol, Stephenson, and Labbé St-Vincent (2017).

Respondents who indicated that they voted were coded as 1 and abstentionists as 0. Some 72.7% of respondents reported having voted, which is higher than the average municipal participation rate of 44.8%. More specifically, 78.1% of respondents reported voting in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, 74.7% in those with 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, 70.7% in those with 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, and 71.2% in those with more than 100,000 inhabitants. In 2013, by contrast, the average turnout was 46.90% in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, 45.15% in those with 5,000–20,000 inhabitants, 42.62% in those with 20,000–100,000 inhabitants, and 43.98% in those with over 100,000 inhabitants.

Models

The main independent variable [political competence] is the information index, which is composed of six dichotomous variables: a) self-assessment of respondents' knowledge of candidates for councillor, b) self-assessment of respondents' knowledge of candidates for mayor, c) self-assessment of candidates' knowledge of platforms for candidates for councillor, d) self-assessment of candidates' knowledge of platforms for mayor, e) self-assessment of the level of knowledge of municipalities' responsibilities, and f) a measure of the sense of being sufficiently informed to vote. The congruence of the index is very satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.799 (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

The models also include several control variables that may influence both participation and the level of information of respondents, such as age, gender, education, income, ownership or tenancy of one's home, interest in politics, and the presence of at least one political party in the municipality. The wordings of the questions and coding of variables are available in the appendix, as well as the descriptive analysis for each of the variables and the correlation matrix.

The models were estimated from the logistic regression and the standard errors were adjusted by taking into account the respondent's allotment to one of the four municipality size categories (robust cluster variance estimator).

Results

The analysis of the results will take place in three steps. First, we will present the relationship between information and voter turnout. Next, we will look at the mediation effect of the information on the control variables. Finally, we will present the interaction effects between the information index and the size of municipalities, political interest, and the age of respondents. The results are presented in Table 2 (next page).

Model B shows that the information index is significantly correlated with voter turnout. The marginal effect (Dy/DX), presented in Table 3 (next page), shows that each additional point on the information index is linked to an 11.2% increase in participation. Comparing model B with model D shows the effect of the introduction of control variables on this relationship. It appears that the introduction of control variables has little effect on the relationship between the information index and voter turnout. The relationship remains very significant at the 1 per 1,000 threshold and the marginal effect remains high at 9.5 percentage points.

Model C, strikingly, shows that five of the six variables in the information index are significantly associated with voter turnout. Only knowledge of the responsibilities of municipalities is insignificant. A comparison of model C with model E shows the effect of the introduction of control variables. It appears that the introduction of control variables has little effect on the relationship between the variables making up the information index and voter turnout. Four relationships remain highly significant at the 1 per 1,000 threshold. Knowledge of municipal responsibilities also remains insignificant in the E model. With respect to knowledge of mayoral candidates, the significant relationship to the 1% threshold in model C remains significant, but at the 5% threshold in model E. Moreover, the introduction of control variables also has little effect on the intensity of the relationships illustrated by the marginal effects (Dy/Dx) presented in Table 3.

In the order of importance and intensity of effects, knowledge of the platforms or projects of mayoral candidates first increases the probability of participating in the election by 20.2 percentage points in model C and 18.8 percentage points in model E. Then comes the sense of being sufficiently informed, with an effect of 17.7 percentage points in model C and 14.7 percentage points in model E. Next, knowledge of the platforms of the candidates for a councillor position has an effect of 12.7 percentage points in model C and 11.1 percentage points in model E. The knowledge of the candidates for mayor and councillor closes the gap with 5.6 and 9.3 percentage points respectively in model C and 3.9 and 7.7 in model E.

Table 2

Logistic regression with R.C.V.E.

| | A | B | C | D | E |
|--|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| | Coef. (S.E.) | Coef. (S.E.) | Coef. (S.E.) | Coef. (S.E.) | Coef. (S.E.) |
| Constant | -0.91*** (0.14) | -0.92*** (0.08) | -0.95*** (0.08) | -1.66*** (0.17) | -1.73*** (0.17) |
| Age | 0.02*** (0.002) | | | 0.01** (0.003) | 0.01** (0.003) |
| Gender (male) | 0.28* (0.09) | | | 0.14 (0.10) | 0.18 (0.10) |
| High school or less | -0.15 (0.10) | | | 0.02 (0.12) | -0.01 (0.12) |
| University degree | 0.18 (0.10) | | | -0.002 (0.12) | 0.02 (0.12) |
| \$50,000 and more | 0.10 (0.10) | | | 0.08 (0.11) | 0.09 (0.11) |
| Homeowner | 0.59*** (0.09) | | | 0.31** (0.11) | 0.32** (0.11) |
| Political party | 0.70*** (0.08) | | | 0.31** (0.10) | 0.27** (0.10) |
| Interest in politics | 1.01*** (0.09) | | | 0.62*** (0.09) | 0.60*** (0.09) |
| Information index | | 0.70*** (0.03) | | 0.65*** (0.02) | |
| Knowledge of mayoral candidates | | | 0.34** (0.12) | | 0.25* (0.12) |
| Knowledge of the position of councillor candidate | | | 0.59*** (0.13) | | 0.53*** (0.13) |
| Knowledge of the mayoral platforms or projects | | | 1.13*** (0.12) | | 1.15*** (0.12) |
| Knowledge of councillors' platforms or projects | | | 0.79*** (0.13) | | 0.71*** (0.13) |
| Knowledge of responsibilities | | | 0.11 (0.11) | | 0.07 (0.12) |
| Sense of being sufficiently informed | | | 1.03*** (0.11) | | 0.94*** (0.17) |
| (n) | 3,184 | 3,160 | 3,160 | 3,126 | 3,126 |
| Cluster for the category of size of the municipality | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Pseudo-R2 | 0.13 | 0.26 | 0.28 | 0.28 | 0.30 |

Table 3

Marginal effect

| Marginal effects (Dy/Dx) in % | Model B | Model D | Model C | Model E |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Information index | 11.2 | 9.5 | - | - |
| Knowledge of mayoral candidates | - | | 5.6 | 3.9 |
| Knowledge of platforms or projects for councillor candidates | - | | 9.3 | 7.7 |
| Knowledge of mayoral platforms or projects | - | | 20.2 | 18.8 |
| Knowledge of councillor platforms or projects | - | | 12.7 | 11.1 |
| Knowledge of responsibilities | - | | n.s. | n.s. |
| Sense of being sufficiently informed | - | | 17.7 | 14.7 |

Model A presents the effect of the control variables. In this model, variables measuring education and income level are not associated with municipal electoral participation, while age, gender, homeownership, political party presence and interest in municipal politics are associated with participation. A comparison of model A with model D allows for an examination of the mediation potential of the information index on the different significant control variables in model A. The introduction of the information index in model D reduces the statistical significance of the control variables and their intensity, as illustrated by the marginal effects in Table 4. Thus, adding the information index to the model reduces by half the age effect from an increase in participation of 0.2 percentage points for each additional year in model A to 0.1 percentage points in model D. A decrease of about half of the effect is also observed for the homeowner and political party variable, while the effect disappears completely for gender. The most important effect is found for political interest, which ranges from a 25.0 percentage point increase in participation for respondents who express an interest in municipal politics in model A to 8.0 percentage points in model D. These results tend to support the idea that a significant portion of the relationship between age, gender, homeownership, political party involvement and political interest is linked to the information effect.

Table 4
Marginal effect

| Marginal effects (Dy/Dx) in % | Model A | Model D |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Age | 0.2 | 0.1 |
| Gender (male) | 3.3 | n.s. |
| Homeownership | 10.4 | 4.9 |
| Political party | 11.4 | 5.1 |
| Interest in municipal politics | 25.0 | 8.0 |

To understand more about the mechanisms at work in the information effect, we modelled the interaction between the information index and three variables: the size of the municipality's population, age of voters and their level of political interest. Results that illustrate the marginal effects of the interaction between variables are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3. The models also include all the other variables presented in Table 2.

The results of these three figures converge toward the same observation. The effect of the information index is generally uniform for municipality size, political interest, and age. More specifically, an additional point on the information index does not have a greater effect on either the municipal size or age categories. Further, an additional

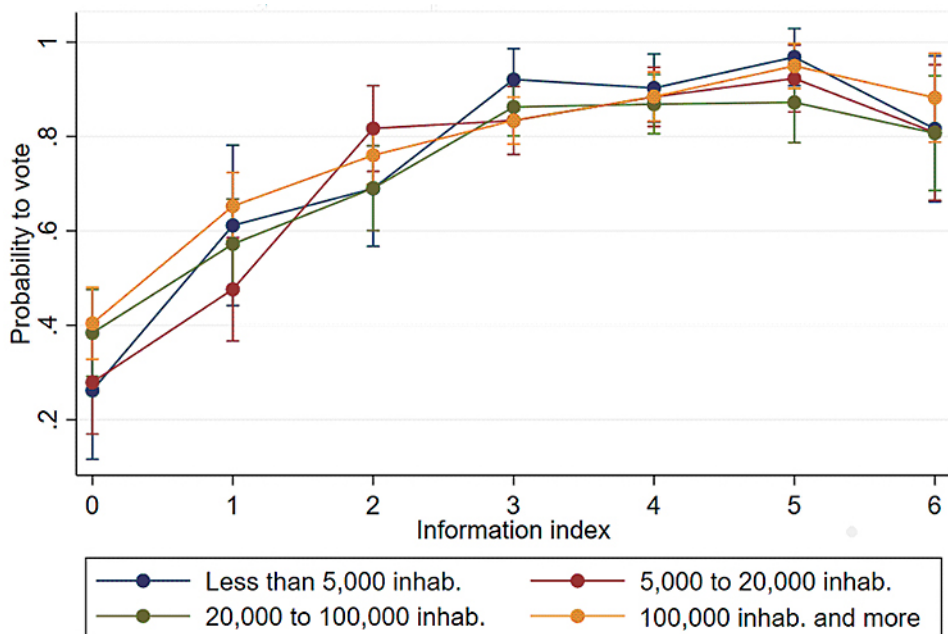


Figure 1
Marginal effects predicted with 95% CLs

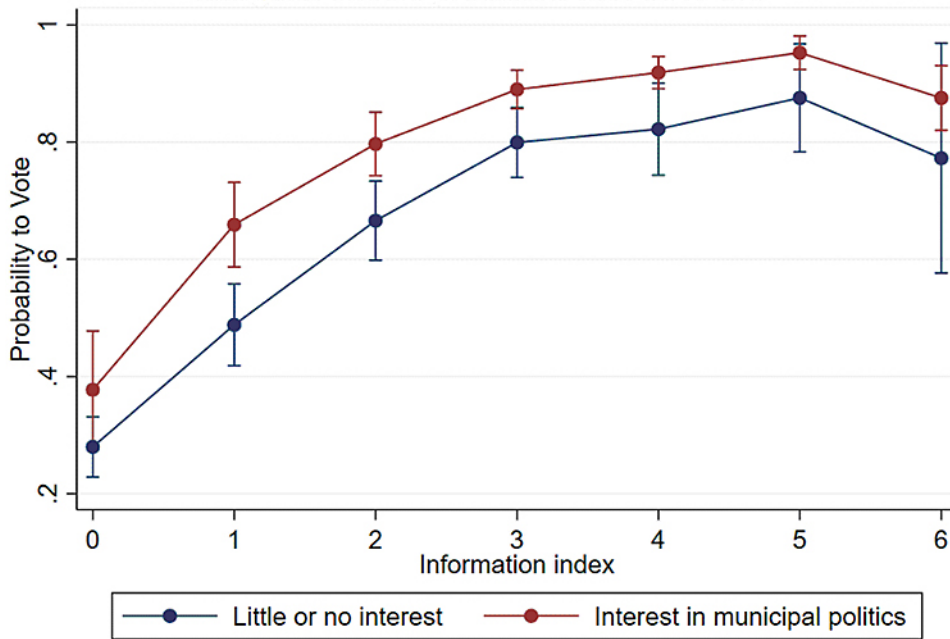


Figure 2
Marginal effects predicted with 95% CLs

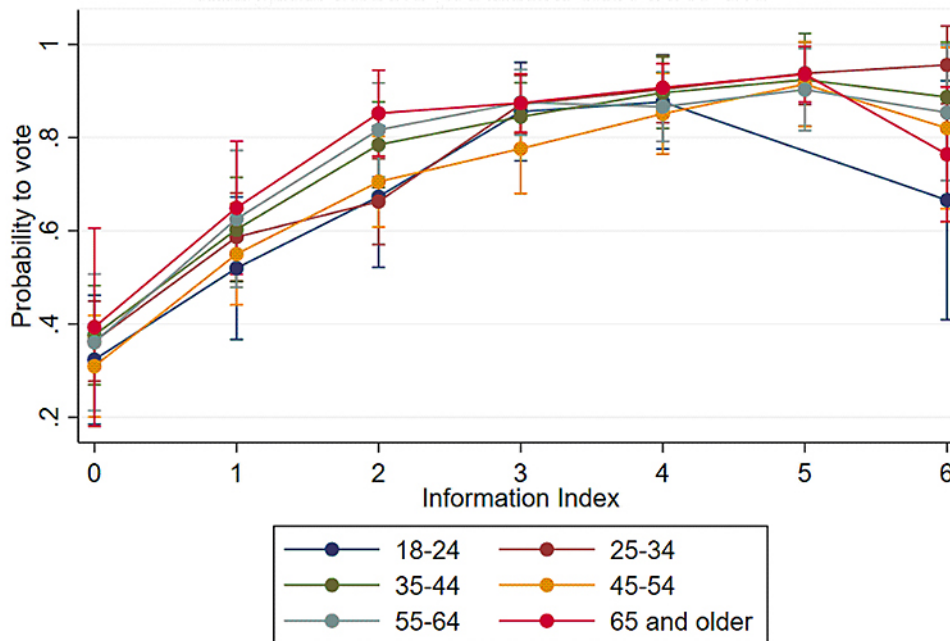


Figure 3
Marginal effects predicted with 95% CLs

point on the information index also has a similar effect for respondents who express an interest in politics and those who do not. Except for respondents who scored three points on the information index, the two groups of respondents from the political interest category do not stand out on the information index.

Discussion

Our survey shows that political competence, measured through our information index, is correlated to individual voter turnout at the municipal level. The effect of the information index is strong and decreases only slightly after

the introduction of control variables. To our knowledge, this is the first time that the correlation of information on municipal voter turnout has been measured in a Canadian context.

In *Accountability and Responsiveness at the Municipal Level: Views from Canada*, Breux and Couture showed that “electors can...reduce the information they need to make a decision by engaging in a retrospective evaluation of the outgoing government’s performance” (2018, 83). This last point is directly related to the concepts of accountability and responsiveness as well as to clarity of responsibility. In other words, “it is possible for electors to assign the results of public action to those elected officials who are responsible for it” (Breux and Couture 2018, 84). However, the results of our survey contradict these findings since, for our sample, clarity of responsibility does not seem to be a factor in the decision as to whether to go to the polls.

Nevertheless, the importance of information on the effect of certain variables should not be overlooked, in particular the variables homeownership, age, and political parties. While Oliver, Ha and Callen (2012) showed that voters tend to be homeowners, our survey shows that the homeowner variable effect hinges on information. The effect of information on the “age” variable should also be considered. The literature has shown that age influences the decision to vote at the municipal level (Nakhaie 2006). Young voters tend to abstain more than older voters, albeit across all levels of government and not only at the municipal level (Steben-Chabot 2016). Still, our survey shows, for the municipal level, that information is associated with the “age” variable. This correlation also confirms the results of a recent qualitative survey based on focus groups with voters who are on average about 20 years old; these voters consider themselves to be insufficiently informed about municipal politics and so are in need of information (Breux and Vallette 2020).

Our study also shows that there is a link between information and the presence of political parties. The literature that has examined the influence of these formations on municipal electoral participation has often led to contradictory conclusions. Some studies hold that political parties increase electoral participation, while others find that their presence does not affect it. In Quebec, Couture et al. (2014), based on aggregate data, showed that the presence of political parties did not affect voter turnout. The results of our survey fine-tune this finding by pointing out that the effect of municipal political parties at the municipal level is mediated by information.

This clarification is most important in the Quebec context. Although regulated by law, the presence of political parties is a subject of debate, and their limitations are often pointed out. Among the latter, their name (often similar), their lifespan (often limited), their platforms (often too similar) and their lack of clear positioning on a left-right axis are often denounced (Bherer and Breux 2012). However, our results suggest that even in this form, these formations are important because of the information they provide. While the very fact of calling them “political parties” raises questions, our survey highlights their role as disseminators of information, regardless of the limitations observed.

Moreover, when distinguishing between the different variables that make up our information index, the more a voter knows about candidates’ platforms and projects, the more likely they are to vote. This is most interesting because in Quebec a candidate is not required to have a political platform or project to run in municipal elections: he or she must merely collect a certain number of signatures to run, a number that depends on the size of the municipality. To the extent that the government agency overseeing municipal elections in the province requires accountability in the use of political financing, consideration could be given to making this accountability conditional on the expression of a platform or program, even if only minimal. This would allow voters to have the opportunity to have similar information for each candidate, whether he or she be independent or a member of a political party. In other words, this would make it possible to structure the electoral offer.

From a methodological point of view, our results are based on an information index, created from an individual’s self-assessment of her or his level of information and knowledge. In political science, political efficacy information is a measure of how individuals evaluate their political knowledge and voting skills. We drew inspiration from this work to create an information index that we adapted according to the elements specific to the municipal context. In our opinion, this is a first response to the working hypothesis of the existence of an information deficit in the context of the municipal level. The fact that the knowledge variables are not too heavily correlated with one another demonstrates the strength of our index.

Our survey shows that the intensity of the effect of the information is uniform when it comes to young people, large cities or people who say they are not interested in municipal politics. This suggests that increasing turnout hinges primarily on better dissemination and structuring of information to voters.

Acknowledgements

The survey data used for these analyses was collected through a partnership between la Chaire de recherche sur la démocratie et les institutions parlementaires and Elections Québec. Elections Québec provided financial and professional support to make this research possible. These analyses are the sole property of the authors. The study also benefit from a SSHRC Grant (435-2019-0920). We are very grateful to both François Gélineau and Jack Lucas for their comments on a preliminary version of this text.

References

- Ashworth, S., and E. Bueno de Mesquita. 2014. Is Voter Competence Good for Voters ? : Information, Rationality and Democratic Performance. *American Journal of Political Science* 108(3): 565–587.
- Baek, M. 2009. A comparative analysis of political communication systems and voter turnout. *American Journal of Political Science* 53(2): 376–393.
- Barabas, J., J. Jerit, W. Pollock, and R. Carlisle. 2014. The question(s) of political knowledge. *American Political Science Review* 108(4): 840–855.
- Berggren, H. 2001. Institutional context and reduction of the resource bias in political sophistication. *Political Research Quarterly* 54(3): 531–552.
- Bherer, L. 2011. Pourquoi un sixième mandat pour le maire de Laval en 2009 ? Les sources d'un monopole politique. In *Les élections municipales au Québec en 2011 : enjeux et perspectives*, eds. S. Breux and L. Bherer. Québec, QC: Presses de l'Université Laval, 233–265.
- Bherer, L., and S. Breux. 2012. L'apolitisme municipal. *Bulletin d'Histoire politique* 21(1): 170–184.
- Bimber, B. 2001. Information and political engagement in America : The search for effects of information technology at the individual level. *Political Research Quarterly* 54(1): 53–67.
- Blanchet, A. 2016. Les origines de la sophistication politique. Phd, Département de science politique, Université de Montréal.
- Blondiaux, L. 2007. Faut-il se débarrasser de la notion de compétence politique ? Retour critique sur un concept classique de la science politique. *Revue française de science politique* 57(6): 759–774.
- Breux, S., and L. Bherer. 2011. *Les élections municipales au Québec : enjeux et perspectives*. Québec, QC: Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Breux, S., and J. Couture. 2018. *Accountability and responsiveness at municipal level: Views from Canada*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Breux, S., J. Couture, and L. Bherer. 2014. Les candidats sortants : atout ou obstacle à la participation électorale ? *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 23(2) 59–78. DOI: ISSN 1188-3774.
- Breux, S., J. Couture, and N Goodman. 2017. Fewer voters, higher stakes? The applicability of rational choice for voter turnout in Quebec municipalities. *Environment and planning C: Government and Policy* 35(6): 990–1009.
- Breux, S., et S. Vallette. 2020. Voter à l'échelle municipale au Québec : Significations et portée chez certains jeunes électeurs. *Revue Jeunes et Société* 5(1): 5070. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070525ar>.
- Campbell, A., P. E. Converse, W. Miller, and D.E Stokes. 1960. *The American voter*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Chong, D, and J. Druckman. 2007. Framing public opinion in competitive democracies. *American Journal of Political Science Review* 101(4): 637–655.
- Couture, J., S. Breux, and L. Bherer. 2014. Analyse écologique des déterminants de la participation électorale municipale au Québec. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47(4): 787–812.
- . 2018. Political accountability and responsiveness: What is the role of municipal political parties ? In *Accountability and responsiveness at the municipal level. Views from Canada*, eds. S. Breux and J. Couture. Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 76–107.
- Crowder-Meyer, M., S. Kushner Gadarian, and J. Trounstone. 2020. Voting can be hard, information helps. *Urban Affairs Review* 56(1): 124–153.
- Cutler, F., and J. S. Matthews. 2005. The challenge of municipal voting: Vancouver 2002. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38(2): 359–382.
- Dassonneville, R. 2012. Electoral volatility, political sophistication, trust and efficacy, A study on changes in vo-

- ter preferences during the Belgian regional elections of 2009. *Acte Politica* 47: 18–41. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2011.19>.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., and S. Keeter. 1993. Measuring political knowledge: Putting first things first. *American Journal of Political Science* 37(4): 1179–1206.
- Delli Carpini, M. and S. Keeter. 1996. *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dostie-Goulet, E, A. Blais, P. Fournier, and E. Gidengil. 2013. L'abstention sélective, ou pourquoi certains jeunes qui votent au fédéral boudent les élections municipales. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 909–927.
- Downs, A. 1957. *An economic theory of democracy*. New-York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Dumitrescu, D. 2012. The importance of being present: Election posters as signals of electoral strength, evidence from France and Belgium. *Party Politics* 18(6): 941–960. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810389644>.
- Elmendorf, C., and D. Schleicher. 2012. Districting for a low-information electorate. *Yale Law Journal* 121(7): 1846–1886.
- Fernbach, P. M, C. R. Todd Rogers, C. Fox, and S. A. Sloman. 2013. Political extremism is supported by an illusion of understanding. *Psychological Science* 24(6): 939–946.
- Fornell, C., and D. F. Larcker. 1981. Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research* 18(1): 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151312>.
- Gaxie, D. 1978. *Le cens caché. Inégalités culturelles et ségrégation politique*. Paris, FR: Seuil.
- Gordon, S., and G. Segura. 1997. Cross-national variation in the political sophistication of individuals: Capability or choice? *Journal of Politics* 59(1): 126–147.
- Kaid, L., M. McKinney, and J. Tedesco. 2007. Political information efficacy and young voters. *American Behavioral Scientist* 50(9): 1093–1111.
- Larcinese, V. 2007. Information acquisition, ideology and turnout: Theory and evidence from Britain. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 21(2): 237–276.
- Lassen, D. D. 2005. The effect of information on voter turnout: Evidence from a natural experiment. *American Journal of Political Science* 49(1): 103–118.
- Luskin, R. 1990. Explaining political sophistication. *Political Behavior* 12(4): 331–361.
- Mavaddat, N., A.L. Kinmonth, S. Sanderson, P. Surtees, S. Bingham, and K. Tee Khaw. 2011. What determines Self-Rated Health (SRH)? A cross-sectional study of SF-36 health domains in the EPIC- Norfolk cohort ? *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 65: 800–806.
- Mévellec, A. 2018. Accountability and local politics: Contextual barriers and cognitive variety. In *Accountability and responsiveness at the municipal level : views from Canada*, eds. S. Breux and J. Couture. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 153–174.
- Milner, H. 2002. *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Morin-Chassé, A., D. Bol, L. B. Stephenson, and S. Labbé St-Vincent. 2017. How to survey about electoral turnout? The efficacy of face-saving response items in 19 different contexts. *Political Science Research Methods* 5(3): 575–584.
- Nakhaie, M. R. 2006. Electoral participation in municipal, provincial and federal elections in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39(2): 363.
- Neuman, W. R. 1986. *The paradox of mass politics: Knowledge and opinion in the American electorate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Niemi, R., S. Craig, and F. Mattei. 1991. Measuring internal political efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study. *American Journal of Political Science* 85: 1407–1413.
- Oliver, J. E, E. S. Ha, and Z. Callen. 2012. *Local elections and the politics of small scale democracy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Oliver, E. J. 2000. City size and civic involvement in metropolitan America. *The American Political Science Review* 94(2): 361–373.
- Pantoja, A., and G. Segura. 2003. Fear and loathing in California: Contextual threat and political sophistication among Latino voters. *Political Behavior* 25(3): 265–286.
- Römmele, A. 2003. Political parties, party communication and new information and communication technologies. *Party Politics* 9: 7–20.

Rugh, J. S., and J. Trounstein. 2011. The provision of local public goods in diverse communities: Analyzing municipal bond elections. *The Journal of Politics* 73(4): 1038–1050.

Shineman, V. A. 2018. If you mobilize them, they will become informed. Experimental evidence that information acquisition is endogenous to costs and incentives to participate. *British Journal of Political Science* 48(1): 189–211.

Steben-Chabot, J. 2016. « Ça me tentait pas » : *Exploration des mots des jeunes abstentionnistes au Québec. Une analyse qualitative de l'abstentionnisme chez les jeunes électeurs québécois*. Chaire de recherche sur la démocratie et les institutions parlementaires, Université Laval (Québec).

Stockemer, D., and F. Rocher. 2017. Age, political knowledge and electoral turnout: A case study of Canada. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 55(1): 41–62.

Trounstein, J. 2008. *Political monopolies in American cities: The rise and fall of bosses and reformers*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2009. All politics is local: The reemergence of the study of city politics. *Perspectives on Politics* 7(3): 611–618. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709990892>.

Trumm, S., and L. Sudulich. 2018. What does it take to make it to the polling station? The effects of campaign activities on electoral participation. *Party Politics* 24(2): 168–184.

Zaller, J. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Zaller, J. 1991. Information, values, and opinion. *The American Political Science Review* 85(4): 1215–1237.

Appendix 1 Descriptive Statistics

| | MEAN | MIN. | MAX. | S.D. |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| Age | 47.9 | 18 | 90 | 17.3 |
| Male | 0.47 | 0 | 1 | - |
| High school or less | 0.19 | 0 | 1 | - |
| University degree | 0.35 | 0 | 1 | - |
| \$50,000 and more | 0.62 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Homeowner | 0.63 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Political party | 0.56 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Interest in politics | 0.61 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Information index | 2.69 | 0 | 6 | 1.81 |
| Knowledge of mayoral candidates | 0.63 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Knowledge of councillor candidate | 0.44 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Knowledge of the mayoral platforms or projects | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Knowledge of councillors' platforms or projects | 0.27 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Knowledge of responsibilities | 0.39 | 0 | 1 | - |
| Sense of being sufficiently informed | 0.63 | 0 | 1 | - |

| | participation | Age | Male | High school | University | \$50,000 | Homeowner | Political party | Interest | Information index | Knowledge mayoral | Knowledge councillors | mayoral platforms | councillors' platforms | responsibilities | sufficiently informed |
|------------------------|---------------|------|------|-------------|------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|----------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Participation | - | 0.20 | 0.11 | -0.06 | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.20 | 0.16 | 0.34 | 0.48 | 0.36 | 0.33 | 0.21 | 0.24 | 0.22 | 0.43 |
| Age | *** | - | 0.20 | 0.04 | 0.08 | 0.04 | 0.30 | 0.01 | 0.26 | 0.27 | 0.21 | 0.22 | 0.08 | 0.09 | 0.15 | 0.25 |
| Male | *** | *** | - | 0.01 | 0.08 | 0.11 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.14 | 0.15 | 0.10 | 0.09 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.16 | 0.12 |
| High school | ** | * | n.s. | - | -0.35 | -0.26 | -0.12 | -0.08 | -0.09 | -0.07 | -0.12 | -0.06 | 0.03 | 0.00 | -0.08 | -0.03 |
| University | *** | ** | *** | *** | - | 0.25 | 0.14 | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.13 | 0.09 |
| \$50,000 | *** | * | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.40 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.14 | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.08 | 0.09 |
| Homeowner | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.02 | 0.15 | 0.23 | 0.18 | 0.22 | 0.08 | 0.10 | 0.11 | 0.18 |
| Political party | *** | n.s. | *** | *** | *** | *** | n.s. | - | 0.11 | 0.17 | 0.17 | 0.08 | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.08 | 0.14 |
| Interest | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.45 | 0.32 | 0.30 | 0.16 | 0.17 | 0.37 | 0.36 |
| Information index | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.70 | 0.69 | 0.55 | 0.59 | 0.56 | 0.68 |
| Knowledge mayoral | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.56 | 0.20 | 0.22 | 0.27 | 0.38 |
| Knowledge councillors | *** | *** | *** | ** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.16 | 0.24 | 0.28 | 0.37 |
| mayoral platforms | *** | *** | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.46 | 0.10 | 0.22 |
| councillors' platforms | *** | *** | * | n.s. | n.s. | * | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.11 | 0.25 |
| responsibilities | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - | 0.32 |
| sufficiently informed | *** | *** | *** | n.s. | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | - |