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Alphabetical Effects on Political Careers

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Personal names have important consequences for many life outcomes, but their influence on political success is relatively unexplored. Yet widespread biases towards outcomes early in the alphabet and the propensity for some seniority lists (such as those in the United States House of Representatives) to privilege alphabetical position when politicians assume office simultaneously suggest that alphabetically early surnames may promote electoral success. Examining American governors and members of the federal Congress reveals that prominent elected politicians are, on average, earlier alphabetically than their average constituent. Furthermore, members of the House of Representatives are more likely to assume party leadership positions when they are earlier in alphabetical order, whereas members of the Senate (where alphabetical position plays no role in determining seniority) show no such relationship.

KEYWORDS alphabetical order, surnames, bias, politicians, Congress, leadership, elections

It is good to be first, even when that primacy derives from factors other than merit. One such factor of particular ubiquity is alphabetical order. A family name early in the alphabet tends to provide small privileges throughout life because of the prevalence of alphabetized lists (e.g., Ring, 1980; Singh et al., 2006; Jurajda and Münich, 2010; Meer and Rosen, 2011 — though, less happily, academic journals more often ask the alphabetically early to serve as reviewers, seemingly because editors' potential-reviewer lists are alphabetical: see Richardson, 2008). Even when information is searched rather than browsed alphabetically, there are advantages to being nearer "A" than "Z." In Wikipedia, for example, those early in the alphabet have more informative, better-curated pages: editors supplying information tend to proceed alphabetically, and their energies dissipate as projects involving large numbers of entries advance (Wattenberg and Viégas, 2010: 190). These advantages are likely reinforced by classification schemas that cue preferences for early alphabetical positions by consistently asserting that an "A" rating is better than "B," which in turn is better than "C": consider classroom grades, or bond ratings, or commodity standards (e.g., grade-A eggs). This leads experimental subjects, at least, to express an overall preference for items with designations earlier in alphabetical order, even when they

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do not express any statistically significant difference in specific traits between the items being evaluated (Dean, 1982).

In many contexts, these advantages may not amount to much. Yet it is not farfetched that alphabetism can sometimes have substantively important effects. Orthographic characteristics of names provoke judgments of characteristics such as likability, even independently of those names' signals of sex, age, race, and other demographic characteristics (Laham et al., 2012). Some names, notably, have an aura of success: their holders are assumed to be more successful, which could certainly affect electability and hence the appeal and duration of political careers (Mehrabian, 2001). Moreover, alphabetical order has observable consequences for success in some professional fields, notably academia (Merritt, 1999; van Praag and van Praag, 2008; Levitt and Thelwall, 2013). Politics is another field where names are likely to matter. Names are, after all, a virtually universal presence on ballots when voters choose candidates, cuing associations when other factors, such as the much-studied stimulus of candidates' personal appearance, are less readily available. At the extreme, campaign signs or billboards often have little content other than the relevant candidate's name. Indeed, scholars have long found that, in experiments involving mock elections, candidates and parties early in the alphabet have an advantage (Bagley, 1965; Johnson and Miles, 2011), even when accounting for ballot designs that order candidates alphabetically and might thereby favor first-listed candidates (Bakker and Lijphart, 1980; Kelley and McAllister, 1984).

Do these effects carry over outside of experimental settings into the real world? Scholars have tended to assume not. Some experimental tests using actual political-party names have not exhibited the same alphabetical biases (Johnson and Miles, 2011), and observed alphabetical advantages in elections have been observed in contexts where candidates were listed alphabetically, so that any difference could be attributed to ballot-order effects rather than alphabetism per se (Lijphart and Pintor, 1988; Wood et al., 2011; Webber et al., 2014). It is true that substantively extraneous factors such as alphabetical order have more scope to influence voters in contexts featuring weak partisan signals (or undifferentiated ones, as in a primary election) and low name recognition, and less scope to apply to highly visible, powerful offices where more information is available about candidates and issues (Brockington, 2003; Meredith and Salant, 2013). People's tendency to favor alphabetically early names nevertheless may mean that those early in the alphabet are more likely to obtain elected office — and that their political careers may differ even once they are in office. Certainly, prior studies have found other aspects of candidates' names, such as rhythm and ease of pronunciation, to affect electoral success both in the laboratory and in real-world elections (e.g., O'Sullivan et al., 1988; Smith, 1998; 2007).

This article looks to examine that proposition empirically in real-world outcomes in the United States, focusing on two specific questions on how alphabetical position relates to political success. The first of these concerns whether elected politicians are earlier in alphabetical position than are the constituents they represent. Such relative political success could have several possible roots. It could be that (would-be) politicians change their names to exploit potential alphabetical biases, though the general costliness of changing one's name makes this relatively unlikely. More probably, it could be that those earlier in the alphabet, with their confidence bolstered by the disproportionate attention they receive throughout life or with the superior opportunities for success their other alphabet-related advantages provided, are more willing

and able to put themselves forwards as candidates. Additionally, of course, voters who select candidates may have a slightly bias in favor of those earlier in the alphabet, so that even an alphabetically representative pool of candidates will lead to an alphabetically early set of officeholders. This is especially likely when the political careers are progressive, requiring victory in successive elections to ever-more-important positions, or where systems involve primary elections. Either of these processes, by creating a role for elections that are low-information or do not invoke partisan cues, would, along the lines of experimental results, place an especially heavy emphasis on alphabetical cues. Even after passing through those initial bottlenecks, however, those late in the alphabet, bearing a slight additional load when they attempt each successive step up the political ladder, may be less likely to advance further. This suggests that, among prominent political positions, progressively higher offices will have progressively greater bias towards the beginning of the alphabet.

The second central question concerns whether, among bodies of elected politicians, alphabet-based seniority systems translate into greater representation of those early in the alphabet in leadership positions. Alphabetical lists are typically fingered as the source of most alphabetical effects, and seniority lists would be an archetypal instance of these. The United States' Congress provides useful variation in this regard (van der Hulst, 2000: 96). The lower chamber, the House of Representatives, places a relatively high priority on alphabetical position in determining seniority: it is the first factor used to break ties in number of (consecutive) terms served. Conversely, the upper chamber, the Senate, has an extensive list of characteristics other than Senate experience that accrue seniority, from prior service in other offices to the population of the state represented, meaning that alphabetical order virtually never comes into play in determining seniority. Seniority, of itself, is often regarded as being relatively modest in its importance in the modern Congress; over the decades, reforms have reduced the benefits that accrue automatically with seniority (Crook and Hibbing, 1985). Even to the extent seniority retains value, it need not follow the general alphabetical-order rule: in committees, for example, seniority is randomized rather than assigned alphabetically (Kellermann and Shepsle, 2009). The same goes for most other perquisites of seniority (such as allocation of offices), which tend to be randomized among representatives who have equal length of service.

Thus, being higher on seniority lists within the set of people with a given length of service in the House is unlikely to have direct effects on Congressional careers except to the extent being earlier on arbitrary, alphabetized lists helps. The "with a given length of service" qualification is important: longer experience may have substantive effect on legislators' position in legislatures, for example because representatives pick up specific skills on the job (Miquel and Snyder, 2006) or because they have more time to build social networks with fellow legislators (Denord et al., 2011). Once that is taken into account, though, House of Representatives seniority is based on purely alphabetical, non-substantive factors that have little rational basis for affecting leadership prospects.

Are elected officials alphabetically early?

To compare the alphabetical positions of names, the names' individual letters will, as is sometimes done in informatics (e.g., Grannis et al., 2002), be treated as digits in a

base-27 (septemvigesimal) system. Each of the name's letters is converted to a number from A = 1 to Z = 26. The basic alphabetical value of a name used here is then the value of the first letter, plus 1/27 the value of the second letter, plus 1/729 the value of the third letter, plus 1/19683 the value of the fourth letter; for any name with fewer than four letters, the blank characters after the end of the name are assigned a value of zero. Names could then theoretically range in value from 1 (for those with the family name "A") to 26.9999 (for anyone whose surname began "Zzzz"). This coding ignores internal spaces or punctuation: the surname "Goldsmith" is equivalent to "Gold-Smith" or "Gold Smith." Following the most common English-language practice, it also ignores diacritical marks, so that "Pérez" and "Perez" are treated as alphabetically identical. In some cases for comparison populations, only the distribution of first letters of names is available; in these cases, the same process is employed, using only those first letters, so that possible values range from 1 (for all whose surnames begin with "A") to 26 (for "Z"-beginning names).

The first research question asks whether elected politicians names' are, on average, earlier in alphabetical order than are those of the general public. Answering this question requires identifying the alphabetical distribution of names for elected officials, which is relatively straightforward. In this case, the set of politicians considered is the 585 people who held governorships or seats in Congress as of early 2013. The question also requires finding the alphabetical distribution of the population as a whole, which poses more difficulties. The United States' Census Bureau releases lists giving all surnames with at least 100 occurrences in the decennial census (with the most recent available list being from the 2000 Census; Word et al., 2007). These include approximately 90% of the total American population. However, while the lists provide the self-declared racial and ethnic distribution associated with each surname, they do not give any other information. Most notably, these Census lists lack any geographical detail, so that it is unclear which surnames are most common in which states. This matters, because many populations of elected offices (e.g., the Senate or governorships) heavily oversample from low-population states. If those states tend to be earlier or later in alphabetical order, then even if alphabetical position makes no difference to electoral success, the typical officeholder may appear alphabetically earlier than the typical member of the population.

To check for this possibility, I draw upon data from the 1940 Census, the last for which individual returns have been publicly released. It is therefore possible to identify the "average" surname for each state at that time, although these state-level 1940 Census distributions are the data source for which only the first letter of names is available. (Also, a tiny number of census respondents, especially Native Americans, have no surname. For these people, the given name is used instead to determine alphabetical value.) Naturally, 1940 data can only approximate more recent surname distributions in light of the substantial changes in the American population since 1940. Most signally, a far larger proportion of the American population today has a Hispanic or Asian ethnic background. Insofar as these ethnicities diverge from other ethnic groups in their average alphabetical position, the populations may shift. Fortunately, this is checkable using the 2000 list of surnames; it turns out that those identifying as Hispanic have slightly earlier names on average than do others, while Asian populations — influenced by a disproportionate number of names that begin with X, Y, or Z — are substantially later in the alphabet. These two effects roughly

cancel one another out, given the relative growth of the two ethnic groups: the average surname among 1940 census respondents has alphabetical value 11.327, while the average name in the 2000 sample of names with at least 100 occurrences has value 11.334. While the difference between 1940 and the present merits due caution, then, the populations appear from the available evidence to be alphabetically comparable.

The 1940 Census shows decided differences in alphabetical distribution across states. Louisiana's heavily French-tinged population has surnames on average a full letter earlier in alphabetical order than were those of Hawaii Territory with its large Asian population, or Wisconsin's with its large German-derived contingent (who are unusually likely to have names starting with Z, as are some Slavic groups). Most importantly, there is a marked tendency for small states' populations to be alphabetically early. This is largely driven by New England, whose six mostly small states are all within the first seven states in average alphabetical position of surname (Louisiana ranks ahead of Connecticut, but behind the other New England states). Simply comparing the population of, say, Senators to the general population would thus be prone to bias. When computing the expected alphabetical position for politicians among groups such as governors and Senators that over-represent small-state populations, then, the comparisons below take into account the fact that these politicians would, even with no alphabetical bias in selecting officials, be expected to be alphabetically earlier than the overall population.

Cognizant of this complication, Figure 1 shows the average alphabetical position of elected officials and their relevant comparison population of constituents. The leftmost panel shows the pooled results across all three offices (members of either chamber of Congress, governors), while the successive three panels decompose the sample into individual offices. In every case, the elected officials have a lower mean alphabetical position — that is, names earlier in alphabetical order — than do their associated constituents. Given the modest sample sizes and the substantial variability in names, these differences are, however, not always statistically significant at standard benchmarks. In particular, neither house of Congress has an alphabetical distribution distinguishable with 95% confidence (two-tailed) from their baseline populations', even though in the case of the Senate the difference in alphabetical position from the general population's is almost a full letter. Governors do turn

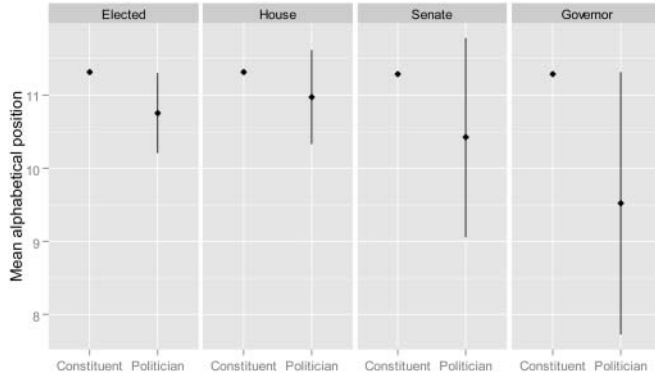

FIGURE 1 Alphabetical positions of constituents and officeholders. Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

out to be distinguishable from their population, with an average alphabetical position of around 9.5 compared to a population average, adjusted for overrepresentation of small states, of 11.3. Pooled across the three offices, politicians also appear disproportionately early in alphabetical order.

Is alphabetical order merely reflecting ballot-position effects here? That is unlikely, because only a minority of American ballots list candidates alphabetically. Most states use factors other than candidate names to determine who gets placed where on the ballot: one recent study (Norman-Eady, 2006) found that only five states — Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, North Carolina, and Vermont — place candidates in strict alphabetical order by name. A few other states use systems that also heavily privilege alphabetical order (Massachusetts places incumbents first, followed by other candidates alphabetically) and six states give election officials discretion that could allow them to order candidates A to Z by name if they wish. In more than thirty states, though, candidates' names either play no role in ballot placement or the alphabet is explicitly randomized — that is, a random draw determines which letter will come first, which second, etc. — before considering candidate names. This limits the degree to which ballot-order effects could be producing the observed results. Still, the subset of states where ballot placement is alphabetical by candidate name could be driving the larger results. Rerunning the analysis of Figure 1 without the states that can or do position candidate names in alphabetical order (including those states where officials choose their own preferred ballot orderings, even though in practice strict alphabetical order by candidate name appears rare there) produces very similar results to those in the figure. Most notably, all officeholders remain alphabetically earlier than their associated constituents.

It is also worth noting that the alphabetical positions of the various classes of office follow the conventional hierarchy of prestige. Members of the House of Representatives are typically regarded as the least powerful of the officeholders considered here: they typically represent less than a full state, they face two-year electoral cycles, and they comprise only 1/435 of the body to which they are elected. They also turn out to be closest to the general population in alphabetical distribution. Senators, who as members of a legislative body generally get less control and media attention than do governors (Burden, 2002) but who enjoy longer terms and statewide constituencies, occupy an alphabetically intermediate position, averaging about half a letter earlier than Representatives. Finally, governors, typically seen as holding the most powerful elected office short of the Presidency, are almost a full letter earlier in alphabetical order than Senators. This confirms anecdotal impressions: eleven of the fifty governors in the sample have surnames beginning with "A" or "B."

Alphabetism, seniority, and legislative leadership

To determine whether alphabetical order associates with obtaining leadership positions in bodies that rely on alphabetical position to determine seniority, this section considers the US Congress. Recall that the House of Representatives uses alphabetical order as the first determinant of seniority after number of (consecutive) terms served, while the Senate essentially ignores names and alphabetical position in determining seniority. Thus, if the use of alphabet-based lists leads to advantages for those early in the alphabet, it would be expected that leaders in the House, but not necessarily

the Senate, would be disproportionately drawn from the early part of the alphabet. In other words, the Senate can serve as a placebo test about how alphabet-derived seniority affects propensity to assume leadership positions.

To assess this, the analysis below looks at members of Congress elected every ten years from the 87th Congress (which started in 1961) to the 112th (which started in 2011). This sample roughly covers the era in which the modern seniority system was in place — it is unclear when the Senate adopted its modern process for determining seniority, though it was in effect by the 1960s. In each of these Congresses, parties elected several leadership positions: each party in each chamber typically elects a whip and a leader; the House of Representatives additionally elects a Speaker of the House, who is *de facto* a leader of the majority party, and each party in the House also selects a conference (Republican) or caucus (Democratic) chair. (Excluding the conference/caucus chair from the list of leadership positions produces similar results.) Thus each Congress in the sample has seven leadership positions in the House and four in the Senate, selected from various subsets of legislators. The model below looks at what factors, including alphabetical position, associate with being one of these selected leaders.

Several other factors are likely to shape leadership prospects and thus are controlled for in the models. Most important is actual number of terms served: chronological seniority, which provides for the experience and connections that are likely to improve one's chances of being elected leader. Which party the member belongs to in an obvious background factor to account for. Also worth attending to is the relative decline in the importance in seniority in recent decades; to ensure that the bygone procedures of long-ago Congresses are not driving the results, models are also estimated only for the most recent half of the sample (from 1991 on).

Table 1 displays the results, first for the House of Representatives, then for the Senate. In the House of Representatives, having a higher alphabetical value — that is, a name later in alphabetical order — is associated with a reduced likelihood of being elected leader. This holds in both the recent part of the sample and across the longer period, and is statistically significant at standard benchmarks. In the Senate, by contrast, no such effect of alphabetical order is evident. This is consistent with the idea that the alphabet-based seniority of the House produces a greater bias in favor

TABLE 1

LOGISTIC MODELS OF INDIVIDUAL LEGISLATORS' OBTAINING A PARTY LEADERSHIP POSITION IN THE US CONGRESS

	House of Representatives		Senate	
	All	Since 1991	All	Since 1991
Alphabetical value	−0.080 (0.028)	−0.122 (0.047)	0.004 (0.034)	0.032 (0.041)
Republican	0.658 (0.541)	0.650 (0.641)	0.076 (0.025)	0.060 (0.031)
Number of terms in House	0.244 (0.041)	0.181 (0.043)	0.241 (0.445)	0.149 (0.613)
N	2607	1301	596	298

Notes: Robust standard errors, clustered by state, are in parentheses. Intercepts are omitted for brevity.

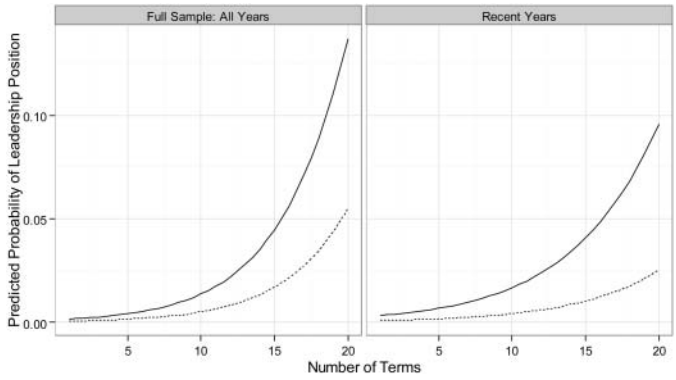

FIGURE 2 Predicted effect of name and years of service on likelihood of obtaining leadership position in the House of Representatives. Solid lines represent an observation at the 25th percentile of Representative names (starting with "D"); dotted lines represent an observation at the 75th percentile (somewhere around "R"); both lines represent a Democrat in 2011.

of those early in the alphabet. The effect size, moreover, is substantively non-trivial. To see this, Figure 2 provides predicted probability of being in leadership for various levels of length of service for two different alphabetical positions. Having a name at the twenty-fifth percentile of the sample distribution alphabetically (because this is a sample of elected officials, that twenty-fifth percentile is closer to the beginning of the alphabet than it would be for the population at large) is estimated to more than double leadership prospects compared to being at the seventy-fifth percentile. This is roughly the same effect as having been in the House of Representatives for nine additional years in the full sample shown in the left half of Figure 2. In the more recent Congresses shown in the right half of the figure, the effect size rises to be comparable to seventeen additional years of experience in the House.

In some ways, this effect is even more noteworthy in conjunction with the results observed in the previous section. The relatively high prospect of obtaining House leadership positions should make it relatively more attractive for alphabetically early Representatives to remain in that chamber rather than try to advance their career by running for the Senate or for governor (Kanthak, 2011). Yet even though this should tend to disproportionately remove those earlier in the alphabet from candidacy for Senate or governor, those offices *still* end up having particularly alphabetically early incumbents.

Conclusion

The results here all tend to suggest that political success is more likely for those whose names appear earlier in the alphabet. Of course, this same process could be explored in many other contexts — not only in societies other than the United States, but also in other sorts of elections (party primaries, local votes). It has implications not only for predicting elections and for designing ballots fairly, but also for academic research: it suggests that in experiments involving mock elections, careful attention must be paid to the orthography of names chosen for fictional candidates. Those sorts of low-stakes contexts are where alphabetism is most likely to influence

vote choice, so that it could easily contaminate inferences by driving outcomes, fracturing the experiments' claims to external validity.

The results here also point to avenues for future research. Alphabetical position is unlikely to be the only dimension of names that affects political success. Even in purely orthographic terms, people also systematically prefer things whose names that begin with the same letters as their own names (Hodson and Olson, 2005), which suggests that common first letters of names, like alphabetically early ones, could be politically useful. This consideration reinforces a general tendency for unusual names to lead to negative outcomes (Kalist and Lee, 2009). Nor is it simply spelling that gives names particular political implications. Shorter or more easily pronounceable names may also be more memorable and attractive to voters (Smith, 1998; Laham et al., 2012). Analysts have only rarely looked at how politics and names relate to one another. This is changing — see Oliver et al. (2013) for a groundbreaking consideration of how ideology shapes baby-name choice — but many potentially important connections remain to be explored.

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