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Andrew Downs: Being first can matter

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If you were running for elected office, would you want your name to be first or second (or third or fifth or last) on the ballot?

Many of us would want to be first, and there's good reason for that. People have a tendency to pick the first option when presented with a list. It's called the primacy effect.

Jon Krosnick, a professor of communication and political science at Stanford University, and others have studied the primacy effect in regard to elections. They've found that being listed first on the ballot is worth 2.5 percent to 25 percent of votes. The effect is largest in races where there is limited information.

The primacy effect might be expected to disappear in high-profile races, but it doesn't. It can be tracked especially well in California because the order of names on the ballot is rotated throughout the state. In 1996 and in 2000, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush both did better on ballots in which they were listed first. Even after controlling for the partisan makeup of voters, Clinton in 1996 performed about 4 percent better when he was listed first. Four years later, Bush collected about 9 percent more votes

when he was listed first.

Not surprisingly, the order of names on ballots has sparked litigation. In 2006, for example, the New Hampshire Supreme Court declared as unconstitutional a state law that required the party that won the most votes in the previous election to be listed first in the next election. Such a system would give the previous winner an advantage in capturing the next election.

For most elections in Indiana, state law requires that names be listed based on the results of the most recent secretary of state race in each county. Candidates who belong to a party that did not have a candidate in the secretary of state's race or who run as independents are listed after the major parties' candidates.

That system would seem to give further advantage to candidates from the established parties.

Indiana has alternatives in deciding the order in which names appear on the ballot.

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Incumbents could be listed first. Names could be listed in alphabetical order of the political parties. And here's an interesting method used in Minnesota: Names are listed in the reverse order of the average vote in the last election. In other words, that state gives the advantage of being listed first to the party that did worst in the most recent election.

Ballot order can make a difference, but there are other things within candidates' control that matter more. The best advice for a candidate: Don't complain about the ballot order and instead campaign hard enough that voters will look for your name on the ballot instead of just picking the first name they see.

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