

Candidate Perceptions of Campaigns under Preferential and Plurality Voting

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Abstract

Preferential voting systems have been proposed as a means of mitigating conflict, because the electoral system may give rivals incentives to cooperate (or weaken their incentives to attack each other politically). This paper reports the results of surveys of candidates in US cities who ran under plurality and preferential voting rules. Candidates from jurisdictions using preferential voting were more likely than plurality candidates to report hiring paid staff and relying on volunteers, and slightly less likely to report using TV or radio ads. Our surveys of voters also indicates that people in cities with preferential voting were less likely than people in cities with plurality elections to recall seeing TV or radio ads, but were more likely to report being contacted by a campaign. Candidates from jurisdictions using preferential voting were also more likely to report praising their rivals, were less likely to say their election was negative, and were less likely to report that their campaign or their opponent's campaign portrayed candidates in negative terms.

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Preferential voting systems can be expected to alter the nature of electoral campaigns, in part, by changing incentives candidates have for attacking rival candidates. Under winner-take-all plurality voting, a voter has a single preference to cast and candidates compete for each voter's single vote. Campaigns are conducted in a zero-sum context: a candidate runs in a situation where any vote not cast for the candidate may be seen as a loss for the candidate. In such a context, the candidate may have strong incentives to criticize and attack opponents, and maximize (or exaggerate) differences between the candidate and rivals in order to attract a voter's single preference.

Preferential systems such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and the Alternative Vote (also known as Ranked Choice Voting or RCV), in contrast, may reduce a candidate's incentive to engage in negative campaigns because they allow (if not require) voters to express multiple preferences.¹ Horowitz (1985; 1991) suggests that by allowing voters to cast multiple preferences, ranked choice voting encourages bargaining, reciprocity and accommodation among rival elites. Reilly (2001; 2004:263) notes that preferential voting changes elections from a zero sum to a positive sum context, and encourages candidates to explore potential areas of commonality on policy, and on political strategy.

¹ Cumulative Voting has a similar mechanism. But rather than ranking candidates with preferences, voters can effectively rank one or more candidates by making choices about how they distribute multiple votes.

Under plurality systems, politicians depend on single votes cast from their most ardent supporters, and on single votes cast from others who may be persuaded that rival candidates are less worthy, if not threatening. Under preferential systems candidates rely not just on support from their ardent supporters; they may also benefit from lower-ordered preferences cast by supporters of their rivals. Given this, we might expect candidates to campaign differently under preferential than plurality rules. With each voter casting second, third, or additional preferences, candidates may have less incentive to attack their rival, for fear of alienating their rival's supporters and losing those voters' lower preferences.

Preferential systems have received substantial attention as a mechanism for mitigating ethnic group conflict and reducing tension in divided societies such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Northern Ireland, Estonia (Reilly 2001; 2002), and Australia's experience with AV has been well studied (e.g. Bean 1997; Farrell and McAllister 2003; Bowler, Farrell and McAllister 1996). Case study evidence suggests that preferential voting may have a moderating effect on electoral politics in Australia (Reilly 2001; 2002), and research documents that Australian political elites bargain and coordinate preference trades in a sophisticated manner (Sharman, Sayers and Miragliotta 2002). Yet we know little about how (or if) preferential voting may affect the tone and style of campaigning in advanced, established democracies.

There is, however, some evidence that candidates campaign differently under preferential (ordinal) than plurality rules, and evidence that preferential voting is

associated with a form of politics that people value. A study comparing US elections conducted under plurality and cumulative voting found candidates in the latter system were more likely to mobilize voters (Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington 2003). A cross-national study of public opinion (Farrell and McAllister 2006) concluded that, other things equal, voters were more satisfied with how democracy worked in nations where people voted for candidates with preferential voting.²

Comparing Campaigns Under Plurality and Preferential Voting in the US

Over the past decade, several US cities have adopted RCV. This project uses a method similar to that employed in Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington (2003) to compare campaigns conducted in places that adopted RCV to campaigns in similar places that used plurality elections. Voter and candidate perceptions of campaigns were measured in RCV jurisdictions, and in plurality jurisdictions that were identified as (approximate) demographic matches for the RCV communities.³ Results and methods of the voter study are presented in a separate paper.

We surveyed candidates for local offices in three cities that conducted RCV elections in 2013 (Cambridge, Minneapolis, and St. Paul) and in four cities that conducted RCV elections in 2012 (Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro, San Francisco). We also surveyed candidates who ran in plurality jurisdictions these same years. The major assumption behind this method is that the plurality jurisdictions are

² Carey and Shugart (1995:425) could be read as suggesting that incentives for cultivating a personal vote may be lower in RCV elections than in plurality systems.

³ As much as possible, RCV cities were matched to cities using plurality elections based on population, income, race/ethnic composition, and region. This process was constrained somewhat by the limited number of jurisdictions conducting mayoral elections in 2013.

similar enough to the RCV places that difference in attitudes and behavior between candidates from RCV and non-RCV places can be attributed to the electoral system. Related to this, we assume that there are no major idiosyncrasies associated with any of these places that would make cross-jurisdictional comparisons problematic. The likelihood of violating these assumptions is reduced by the fact that we have a range of places that were using RCV, and by the fact that each RCV city was matched with multiple (at least three) plurality cities. The RCV cities, and their matching cases, are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Surveys were mailed in late 2013 to all candidates who ran in the most recent election in these places (approximately 670 candidates). Follow up mailings, and emails, produced a response rate of 36%, with similar response rates from RCV and non-RCV jurisdictions.⁴ Responses were slightly higher from places having elections in 2013. Given there were more plurality cities surveyed by design, this produced 151 responses from candidates who ran under plurality rules, and 75 responses from candidates who ran under preferential rules. Thirty-five percent of respondents had won their recent election. Overall, 70% were male, 75% identified as white, the mean age of respondents was 52 years, and just over half had post graduate education.

⁴ This rate is near the mean for response rates for several surveys of parliamentary candidates. The Comparative Candidate Survey reports response rates such as 47% for Australian candidates, 23% for Austrian candidates, 55% in Canada, 32% in Estonia, 44% in Germany, 34% in Greece, 32% in Hungary, 35% in The Netherlands, 17% in Portugal, and 43% in Sweden.

Preliminary Results: Campaign activities

The survey included a battery of questions asking about campaign activities, and a battery of questions asking candidates about their perception of how their most recent campaign was conducted (these including some questions similar to what was asked on the voter surveys). We begin here with a comparison of campaign activities across the two election systems, and then compare candidate perceptions of campaigns.

Given the literature preferential voting, and given that RCV presents candidates with opportunities to appeal for voters' first and lower-ordered preferences, we expected that candidates (or their allies) in RCV cities may have been more likely than candidates (or their allies) in plurality places to ask voters to support themselves and to support another candidate. Given differences between plurality and RCV elections, it was difficult to craft a question using the phrase 'preference' that would be directly comparable across RCV and plurality places. This being so, we asked 'when campaigning, did you ask voters to 1) vote for you only, 2) vote for you and support other candidates seeking the same office?' We also included questions asking (separately) if there were groups working on the candidate's behalf, or working on behalf of the candidate's opponent, that instructed people to "support me and other candidates in my race."

With the questions crafted this way, we find (limited) evidence that RCV elections involved some mutual cooperation among rivals for the same office. Thirty percent of candidates for a plurality office said they asked voters to "support me and support other candidates in my race," while 35% of candidates for an RCV office

reported this. More notable, 37% of candidates in RCV cities said that there were groups working on behalf of their opponent who were instructing people to support multiple candidates. Twenty seven percent of candidates in plurality jurisdictions reported this.

Candidates were also asked about the type of campaign activities they engaged in, and about what they may have spent campaign funds on. In terms of total campaign spending reported by these candidates, there was no significant difference between candidates running in RCV versus plurality elections (this remains so even when we control for high levels of spending reported by candidates from one of the larger plurality cities). As for spending on specific activities, candidates from RCV places were much more likely to report spending on mail (74%) than candidates who ran under plurality rules (55%), and RCV candidates were more likely to hire staff (43% vs. 29%). RCV candidates were slightly more likely to spend money on Internet ads (32% vs. 25%) and RCV candidates were less likely to report spending campaign funds on radio and TV ads. These results are preliminary: it has not yet been established how these differences in campaign techniques hold up when we account for the size of a jurisdiction or the type of office a candidate was seeking.

Table 2 about here

In addition, our survey measured the number of hours candidates spent on various campaign activities "during a typical week," and measured how important the candidate perceived various activities to be. Respondents were offered a list of activities and asked how many hours (in a week) they spent on each. Table 2

displays the mean number of hours candidates from plurality and RCV jurisdictions reported spending on different activities during a typical week (standard deviations, which are quite large for some of these activities, are in parentheses). The sum of the means of reported hours equals 19 hours per day for candidates in plurality places, and 14 hours per day for candidates from RCV places. When all candidates (winners and losers) are considered, RCV candidates reported spending less time on the phone and less time meeting with staff. However when responses from winning candidates are examined, RCV candidates reported spending more hours knocking on doors than candidates in plurality races.

Table 3 here

Table 3 presents the mean of candidate responses to questions asking which campaign activities were seen as more or less important to the candidates. We had expected that candidates in RCV places, having an eye toward attracting preferences from supporters of rival candidates, would have been more likely to report that "building alliances with rival candidates" was an important part of their most recent campaign. Yet, as indicated in Table 3, there is no difference between RCV and plurality candidates in the mean levels of importance assigned to building alliances with rivals. Nonetheless, we do observe significant differences between the campaign activities that were seen as important to RCV candidates versus plurality candidates. Among winning candidates, RCV candidates were more likely (prob. $t = .06$) to say it was important to have volunteers on their campaign, and to say it was important to maintain a web site (prob. $t = .05$).

Again, these results are preliminary. Yet these findings to suggest that, at the

local level in the US, elections conducted with preferential voting were associated with a different style of campaigning than those conducted under winner-take-all plurality rules: Under preferential voting there may have been less importance of radio and TV advertising, and a greater importance of paid staff,⁵ volunteers, door-to-door contacts, direct mail, and web advertising. At this point, we cannot speculate as to how, or if, these potential differences in campaigning translates into campaigns that were less negative and less adversarial. We can start at this by examining what candidates thought about how the campaigns were actually conducted.

Preliminary Results: Candidate perceptions of campaigns

Candidates' perceptions of campaigns were measured with several different survey items. Our primary goal with these was to assess how candidates perceived the quality of the campaigns they participated in, in terms of the tone of the campaign (negative or not), and in terms of information that the campaigns disseminated. Candidates were asked how satisfied they were with the way other candidates conducted their campaigns, and if they thought that other candidates provided people with useful information. On these items, we found no notable differences between candidates from places using plurality or RCV elections.

Figure 1 about here

Responses to a number of additional questions do suggest that there were differences in how candidates perceived the tone of these campaigns. Candidates

⁵ Experience with local campaigns suggests paid staff are often field coordinators who direct volunteers in canvassing efforts.

were asked how they perceived how "your main rival's campaign described you" (with response options being mostly positive, somewhat positive, not really positive or negative, somewhat negative, or mostly negative). They were also asked, "how did your own campaign describe your main rival in the race," with the same response categories offered.⁶ The upper panel of Figure 1 illustrates the percent who indicated that they were portrayed somewhat or mostly negatively by their rival during the campaign. Nearly 40% of candidates who ran for office under plurality rules reported their rival described them in negative terms, whereas 29% of candidates running under preferential rules reported this.⁷ The second panel of Figure 1 displays how candidates described the manner in which their own campaign portrayed the candidates' main rival. Again, we find evidence suggesting less adversarial campaigning under RCV. Twenty one percent of RCV candidates reported that their own campaign described a rival negatively; this compares to 37% of candidates who campaigned under winner-take-all plurality elections.⁸

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 provides further illustration that campaigns conducted under RCV may have been less negative than plurality contests. The upper panel in Figure 2 reports the results of a question that asked candidates if the election they ran in was

⁶ Candidates with no opponent are omitted from the analysis here.

⁷ Anderson et al (2005) demonstrate that attitudes about politics are conditioned by whether or not someone was on the winning or losing side of an election. The effect of RCV election system being associated with less negativity remains statistically significant ($p = .07$) when we control for whether the candidate won office and if the jurisdiction used district vs. at large elections.

⁸ The effect of RCV election system being associated with less negativity remains statistically significant ($p = .00$) when we control for whether the candidate won office and if the jurisdiction used district vs. at large elections.

more or less negative compared to other recent political contests. Response options ranged from "a lot more negative" to "a lot less negative." Forty-seven percent of candidates seeking office under RCV said their contests were less negative than before, while 37% of candidates in plurality contests gave this response. Conversely, just 8% of RCV candidates thought the most recent campaign was "a lot more negative" than before (compared to 15% of plurality candidates). As an alternative measure of how candidates perceived their elections, candidates were if they thought the campaign was interesting or dull? Larger majorities of candidates from both electoral systems reported their contests were interesting, but as Figure 3 illustrates, candidates who ran in plurality contests were nearly twice as likely to say their race was dull.⁹

Conclusion

The results here are preliminary, in that our data were collected at one point in time (late 2013-early 2014), with a focus on seven elections conducted with Ranked Choice Voting. Even with adequate response rates, candidate surveys such as this will invariably yield a low number of observations given the size of the population being targeted. Expanding this research to additional jurisdictions, at a different point in time, may give us more leverage for answering questions about whether (or how) preferential voting may cause campaigns to be less negative.

That said, the results reported here do suggest there may have been

⁹ The effect of plurality election system being associated with perceptions the election was dull remains statistically significant ($p = .07$) when we control for whether the candidate won office and if the jurisdiction used district vs. at large elections.

differences between campaigns conducted under RCV in 2012 and 2013, and those conducted under plurality rules in similar places at the same times. For reasons yet to be determined, campaigns conducted under RCV appear (based on what the candidates tell us) to have relied less on TV and radio, while relying more on staff, volunteers, and advertising by mail and Internet. A greater reliance on staff (which could likely be field coordinators) and volunteers suggests greater efforts at contacting and persuading voters. Indeed, results from our surveys of voters demonstrate that people in cities using RCV in 2013 were more likely to report being contacted by a campaign, compared to people in similar cities using plurality elections, and less likely to recall seeing TV or radio ads.

These differences in campaigning correspond with candidates from RCV places perceiving less negativity in their contests than candidates from plurality places. The magnitude of the effects in our candidate survey are modest, but we do find a pattern here: RCV candidates were more likely than plurality candidates to report that rivals were praising each other, RCV candidates were more likely to say their contests were less negative compared to other elections, and RCV candidates were less likely to report that their campaign or their opponent's campaign was negative. An important question that follows from this is, did the voters notice? As we show in a separate paper, compared to voters in plurality places, voters in RCV jurisdictions were less likely to report that candidates spent a great deal of time criticizing their opponents, and they were more likely to report that campaigns seemed less negative than before.

Table 1: Jurisdictions included in the study

<i>RCV cities</i>	<i>Matched plurality cities</i>
Berkeley, CA	Alameda, CA; Pasadena, CA; Santa Monica, CA
Cambridge, MA	Ann Arbor, MI; Lowell, MA; Stamford, CT; Worcester, MA.
Oakland, CA	Richmond, CA; Sacramento, CA; Vallejo, CA.
Minneapolis, MN	Boston, MA; Cincinnati, OH; Seattle, WA; Tulsa, OK.
San Leandro, CA	Daly City, CA; Fairfield, CA; Hayward, CA; Union City, CA.
San Francisco, CA	Portland, OR; San Diego, CA; San Jose, CA
St. Paul, MN	Cedar Rapids, IA; Des Moines, IA; Madison, WI; Spokane, WA.

Table 2: Hours spent per week campaigning, reported by all candidates

	Plurality	RCV
Doorknocking	49.5 (121)	41.4 (110)
Speaking on phone	20.0 (55)	9.1 (21)
Meeting with staff	14.0 (33)	9.5 (21)
Sending emails	12.0 (34)	13.9 (53)
Speaking in public	8.8 (22)	5.2 (8)
Organizing mailings	7.9 (26)	2.9 (8)
Posting on social networks	6.4 (15)	5.2 (9)
Fundraising events	6.0 (14)	3.9 (9)
Managing website	5.0 (15)	3.4 (11)
Blogging	2.1 (9)	0.9 (2)
Radio / TV interviews	2.1 (5)	1.1 (3)
Twitter	1.9 (7)	1.9 (7)
Newspaper interviews	1.8 (3)	1.5 (2)
	n=146	n=74

Hours spent per week campaigning, reported by winning candidates

	Plurality	RCV
Doorknocking	50.8 (150)	56.1 (150)
Speaking on phone	17.2 (30)	5.7 (5)
Meeting with staff	11.6 (31)	5.5 (10)
Organizing mailings	11.1 (30)	1.6 (2)
Sending emails	7.2 (15)	21.1 (82)
Fundraising events	6.7 (15)	3.5 (6)
Speaking in public	3.0 (5)	3.0 (5)
Posting on social networks	2.5 (5)	2.5 (5)
Radio / TV interviews	2.1 (7)	0.5 (1)
Managing website	1.6 (3)	1.2 (4)
Newspaper interviews	1.1 (1)	0.7 (1)
Blogging	0.7 (2)	0.1 (.4)
Twitter	0.5 (1)	0.5 (1)
	n=52	n=23

Note: Mean number of hours reported per activity (standard deviation in parentheses).

Table 3: How important were the following (1=did not do / not important; 5= extremely important), reported by all candidates.

	Plurality	RCV
Volunteers	4.11	4.11
Speaking at forums	3.69	3.65
Money for advertising	3.82	3.30
Campaign website	3.32	3.90
Local news coverage	3.31	3.53
Social networking sites	3.15	3.30
Endorsements from groups	3.30	2.93
Support from party	2.68	2.61
Building alliances with rivals	1.99	2.10
	n=141	n=70

How important were the following (1=did not do / not important; 5= extremely important), reported by winning candidates.

	Plurality	RCV
Volunteers	3.86	4.50*
Money for advertising	3.88	3.45
Endorsements from groups	3.35	3.27
Speaking at forums	3.33	3.50
Campaign website	2.98	3.67*
Social network sites	2.96	3.04
Local news coverage	2.86	2.95
Support from a party	2.84	2.60
Building alliances with rivals	1.68	1.72
	n=51	n=22

Note: Mean response scores, per item.

* Significant difference between means (t test).

Figure 1: Candidate perceptions of how they and their rivals were described during the campaign

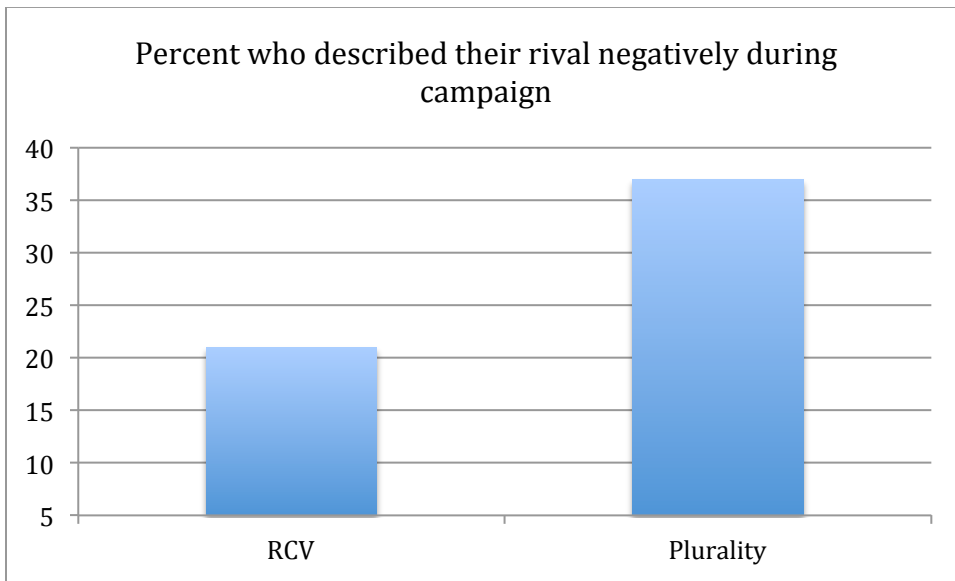
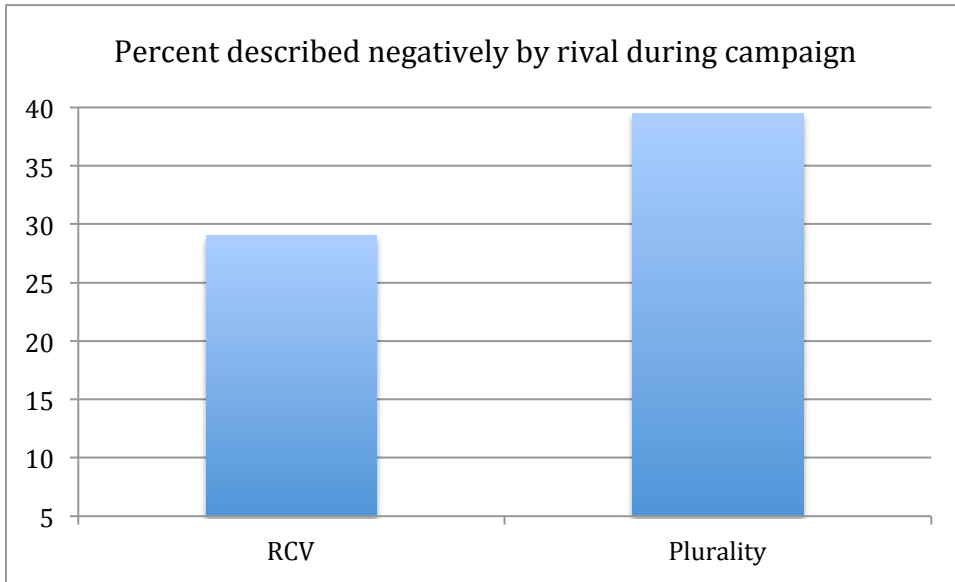


Figure 2: Candidate perceptions of tone of campaigns

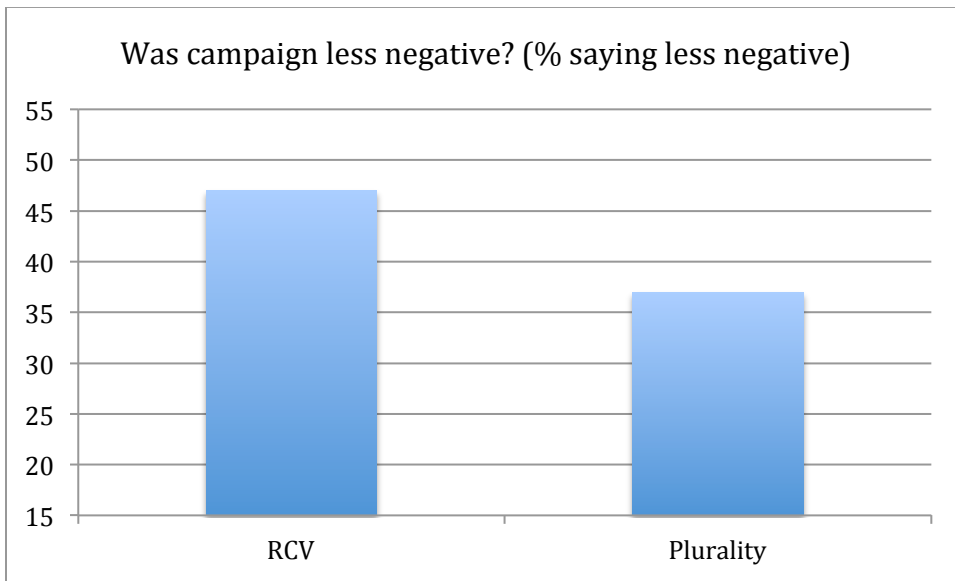
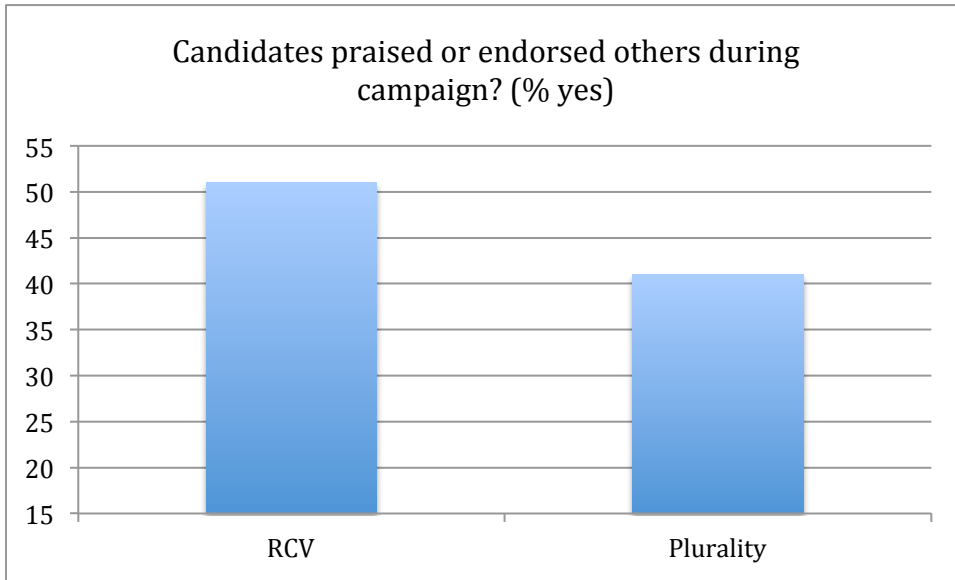
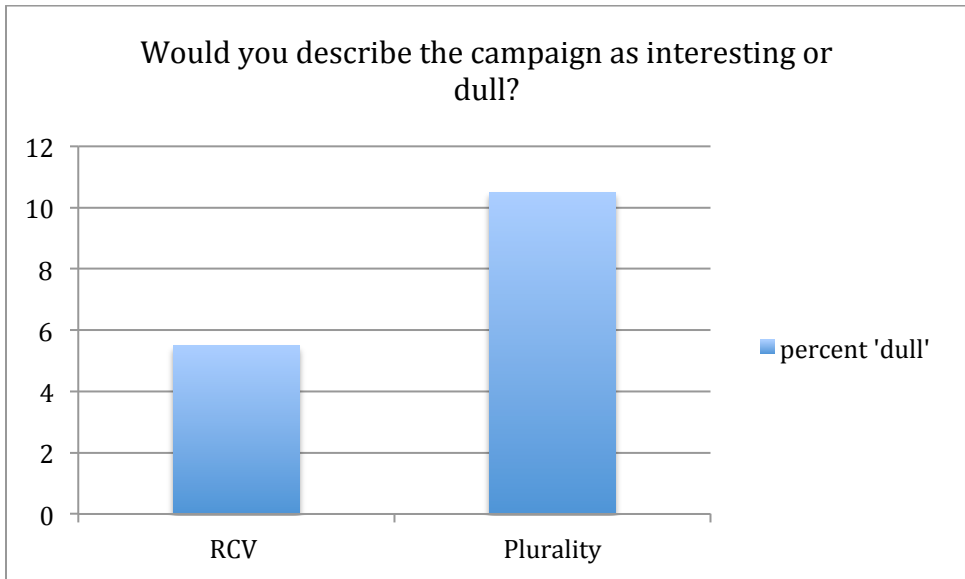


Figure 3: Candidate perception of campaign being interesting.



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