The Cost/Benefit Voting Decision: The Influence of the Numbers of Statewide Legislative Referenda and Other Forms of Direct Democracy in the U.S.

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Abstract This empirical study investigates the potential effects of “direct democracy” on the voter participation rate. Direct democracy is assumed to take three forms: the number of statewide initiatives, the number of statewide popular referenda, and the number of statewide legislative referenda. This study tests the hypothesis that greater numbers of such initiatives and referenda increase voter turnout because they elevate the expected gross benefits of voting by “empowering voters” while not significantly increasing the expected gross costs of voting. Using state-level data for the 2004 Presidential election, and after allowing for a variety of economic and demographic factors, this study finds compelling evidence that greater numbers of such statewide ballot measures act to elevate the voter participation rate in the U.S.

Keywords: Legislative referenda, popular referenda, initiatives, total ballot measures, voter turnout

JEL Classification: D72

1. Introduction

Voting is, among other things, a fundamental component of the process of determining the magnitude and form of government outlays and taxation policies, approving or disapproving constitutional amendments and various forms of legislation, and influencing certain regulatory and other decisions, and hence plays a significant role in societal resource allocation and income distribution. As Putnam (2000, p. 35) states, “Voting is by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality…Moreover, like the canary in the mining pit, voting is an instructive proxy measure of broader social change.” Indeed, Putnam (2000, p. 35) informs us that “…recent evidence suggests that the act of voting itself encourages volunteering and other forms of good citizenship.”

Since Downs (1957) first introduced the rational voter paradigm, numerous other studies have appeared to enhance or test the theory or variants or implied dimensions thereof, including Buchanan and Tullock (1962), Buchanan (1968), Riker and Ordeshook (1968), Brazel and Silberberg (1973), Ashenfelter and Kelly (1975), Cox and Munger (1989), Brokaw, Gale and Merz (1990), Morton (1991), Aldrich (1993), Copeland and Laband (2002), Barreto, Segura and Woods (2004), Feddersen (2004), Coate and Conlin (2004), Brunner and Balsdon (2004),...
Matsusaka (2005), Cebula (2005), and Cebula and Tullock (2006). Concern over low voter participation rates for the U.S. is expressed frequently in the media and elsewhere. In the words of Putnam (2000, p. 31), “With the singular exception of voting, American rates of political participation compare favorably with those in other democracies...” Putnam (2000, p. 31) further observes that “We are reminded each election year that fewer voters show up at the polls in America than in most other democracies...”

In an effort to help provide further insight into the cost/benefit voting decision calculus, the objective of this study is to determine whether “direct democracy” influences the voter participation rate (VPR), which is measured here by the percentage of eligible voters who actually vote. In this study, direct democracy takes three forms: statewide legislative referenda, statewide popular referenda, and statewide initiatives. As stated in Waters (2003, p. xix), “For a century, the initiative and referendum process has been the critical tool to check the power of unresponsive and unaccountable government...” in the U.S. Accordingly, given that referenda and initiatives arguably can energize the citizenry with a sense of political efficacy, the hypothesis being tested in this study is that the greater the number of statewide legislative referenda plus statewide popular referenda plus statewide initiatives in a state, the greater the voter participation rate (VPR), ceteris paribus. This is because such referenda and initiatives presumably enhance the power of voters to influence the governmental decision-making process. These forms of direct democracy can be interpreted as potentially energizing eligible voters with a sense of political power. This enhancement implies increased expected gross benefits from voting, which in turn increases the expected net benefits from voting, ceteris paribus. In effect, this study tests the Progressive Era proposition that the use of referenda and/or initiatives can act to raise the VPR.

The model provided in Section 2 of the study is a cost-benefit framework that parallels the rational voter model. To measure direct democracy, this study adopts the number of statewide legislative referenda in each state plus the number of statewide popular referenda in each state plus the number of statewide initiatives in each state. Although the use of binary/dummy variables for states offering direct democracy in the forms of statewide initiatives and/or statewide popular referenda may be a reasonable alternative specification, the use of the actual numbers of statewide initiatives and popular referenda more accurately reflects the extent to which such instruments are used in each state and therefore should more accurately reflect the degree to which these instruments in the aggregate may or may not affect voter expectations and behavior. Furthermore, a binary/dummy variable to reflect states permitting legislative referenda is not technically even feasible because statewide legislative referenda are available in all 50 states. Section 3 provides the empirical analysis for the 2004 Presidential election. Section 4 of the study provides a summary.

2. The Framework

Paralleling in principle the rational voter model, it is hypothesized that the probability that a given eligible voter will actually vote, PROBV, is an increasing function of the expected gross benefits (EGB) associated with voting, ceteris paribus, and a decreasing function of the expected gross costs (EGC) associated with voting, ceteris paribus. Thus, it follows that:
PROBV = \( f(EGB, EGC) \), \( fEGB > 0, fEGC < 0; f(EGB-EGC) > 0, fEGB – fEGC > 0 \)  \( (1) \)

The central hypothesis being tested in this study addresses whether, by increasing the power of voters, the number of statewide legislative referenda (LEGREF) plus the number of statewide popular referenda (POPREF) plus the number of statewide initiatives (INIT) increase EGB and (EGB-EGC) and hence, in the aggregate, increase the voter participation rate (VPR), ceteris paribus. Some 24 states have the initiative process. The popular referendum is also available in 24 states. Interestingly, these two sets of 24 states are very similar although not identical [Matsusaka (2005, p. 188)]. The legislative referendum is available in all 50 states. As Matsusaka (2005, p. 187) observes, “A [popular] referendum…is a vote on a law already approved by the legislature…qualified for the ballot by collecting a predetermined number of signatures.” However, a legislative referendum can be “…placed on the ballot directly by the legislature…” [Matsusaka (2005, p.187)]. Perhaps more generally stated, a legislative referendum “…is when the state legislature, an elected official, state appointed constitutional revision commission or other government agency or department submits propositions (constitutional amendments, statutes, bond issues, etc.) to the people for their approval or rejection” [Initiative & Referendum Institute (2004, p. 1)]. The legislative referendum could be a non-binding resolution to secure a sense of public opinion and thus be advisory in nature “…or the [state] constitution may require popular [voter] approval before a law can go into effect....” [Matsusaka (2005, p.187)]. It is argued in this study that statewide legislative referenda presumably increase the power of voters in a state by empowering them to make such decisions. Arguably, statewide popular referenda could also be expected to energize voters with a sense of political influence. Next, Matsusaka (2005, p.187) generically defines an initiative “…as a new law proposed by ordinary citizens that is qualified for the ballot by collecting a predetermined number of signatures from eligible voters.” Matsusaska (2005, p. 187) observes that “Initiatives and referendums [popular] let ordinary citizens take control of the agenda, and they are the form of direct democracy that grabs the headlines.” Accordingly, it is also argued in this study that statewide initiatives empower voters by enabling them to some degree to establish agendas for elected representative officials to follow. Thus, in theory, the greater the LEGREF plus POPREF plus INIT (combined), the greater the EGB (due to an increased sense of political empowerment) and the greater (EGB-EGC), which in turn increases the VPR, ceteris paribus.

Of course, it also can in principle be argued that when voters face initiatives and/or referenda, they are confronted with possible transactions costs of learning enough about those initiatives and/or referenda so that they can cast “informed votes” in the ballot booth. In theory, this consideration would imply an increased EGC and a decreased (EGB-EGC), ceteris paribus. Related to this issue, however, consider the observations by Matsusaka (2005, p. 198), who argues that “…voters do not need a detailed understanding of a measure to register their preferences accurately in the voting booth. They may be able to cast a vote that reflects their underlying interests and values by using information cues or shortcuts, such as recommendations from trusted individuals or organizations.” Citing studies supportive of his arguments by Lupia (1994) and Bowler and Donovan (1998), Matsusaka (2005, p. 198) proceeds to state that “…the evidence suggests that information cues are fairly effective in allowing voters to make reasoned choices in the voting booth.” Based on this perspective, it is hypothesized that, on balance, the VPR is an increasing function of LEGREF plus POPREF plus INIT combined, ceteris paribus.
Aside from LEGREF, POPREF, and INIT combined, other factors influence the voters’ EGBs and EGCs, including fundamentally economic factors. For instance, as observed in Cebula and Toma (2006, p. 35), “The female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) may…influence the expected benefits from voting.” Over time, the FLFPR has risen dramatically. Observe, for instance, that the FLFPR rose at the national level from under 40 percent in 1965 to nearly 60 percent in 2004 (Council of Economic Advisors, 2006, Table B-39). Following the arguments in Cebula and Toma (2006, p. 35), as “…the FLFPR rises, the percentage of the female population in the workplace increases and arguably these females becomes more/better informed on and sensitive to a variety of labor market and economic issues…this increased awareness of and sensitivity to such issues would seem likely to breed an increased interest in the potential impact that their votes might carry.” In other words, as the FLFPR increases, women in the workplace arguably may perceive a greater need (benefit) from acting on behalf of their own best interests with respect to participating in the voting process. Stated in somewhat different terms, Putnam (2000, p. 195) observes that “…the movement of women toward professional [workforce] equality [with men] has tended to increase their civic involvement…and…political interest.” Hence, it is hypothesized, as in Cebula and Toma (2006, p. 35) as well as in Putnam (2000, p. 195), that the higher the female labor force participation rate in a state, the greater the overall VPR in that state, ceteris paribus.

It is also expected that the more poorly a state’s economy is performing, e.g., the higher the state’s unemployment rate (UR), the greater the interest the public (eligible voters) in the state may have in the outcome of a major election. As Cebula (2005, p. 162) argues, if “…the unemployment rate…is rising, the public may wish to express their various fears and concerns about…unemployment and/or their feelings for a need for economic policy changes.” Therefore, the greater the UR in a state, the greater may be the expected benefits from voting as the public uses voting to express their feelings [Copeland and Laband (2002)], i.e., their fears and concerns regarding actual and potential job loss and/or desires for more efficacious government economic policies. Hence, it is hypothesized here that the greater the UR in a state, the greater the VPR in that state, ceteris paribus.

Demographic traits, such as age, might be expected to influence the expected benefits from voting. For instance, consider the fact that the population age 65 and older (AGE) is largely retired. In addition, a very substantial percentage (in excess of 90 percent) of this age group depends at least to a modest (and in many cases, a substantial) degree on Medicare and Social Security [U.S. Census Bureau (2005, Table 521)]. Thus, this age group might be quite sensitive to such considerations as Social Security benefits, Medicare and Medicaid policies, income tax rates, and the taxability of Social Security benefits, as well as economic conditions such as inflation. These types of policy and economic conditions can significantly influence the economic status and physical health of those in this age group. Moreover, this age group may have more time than other age groups to study issues and candidates, as well as to organize among themselves in support of or in opposition to certain policies, programs, or candidates. As a result, it is expected that the greater the proportion of a state’s population that is age 65 or older, the greater the VPR in that state, ceteris paribus.
Regarding another demographic factor, consider the argument in Cebula (2005, p. 162) that “…if would-be voters feel discouraged by (or if they feel politically disenfranchised from) their government because of their perceptions that government…is unresponsive to their needs…voter apathy increases because of perceived lower benefits from voting.” This perspective could very easily be expected of any minority that perceives itself as being economically disadvantaged and/or not being politically advocated on behalf of by elected officials. There are myriad ways in which these perceptions can be reinforced. The most obvious might be that of very low incomes relative to the population as a whole, but alternatives do exist, e.g., failing to have sufficient access to health insurance coverage. Indeed, Swartz (2003, p. 283) observes that most of those persons without health insurance “…have annual incomes below $35,000 [expressed in year 2000 dollars]…” In point of fact, the annual median income of Hispanics in the U.S. in 2004 was only $34,272 [U.S. Census Bureau (2006, Table 679)], some $728 below the $35,000 threshold identified by Swartz (2003). Furthermore, this figure is expressed in current dollars, so that on the surface it overstates the economic status of Hispanics in the U.S. Moreover, in addition to these possible causes of disenfranchisement feelings for Hispanics is the finding that, according to Barreto, Segura, and Woods (2004), Hispanics are significantly underrepresented in elected positions across most of the political spectrum. These considerations lead to the hypothesis that the greater the percentage of a state’s population that is Hispanic (HISP), the lower that state’s VPR, ceteris paribus.

Yet another factor that may influence the expected benefits of voting is per capita personal income (PCPERSINC). That persons with higher incomes per capita are expected to be more likely to vote is certainly not a new idea. For example, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) found that persons with higher incomes (and higher educational attainment) tended to be especially aware of the potential benefits of voting and the economic stakes that were potentially at issue as a result of the voting process. Allegedly, higher income persons tend to be better informed than lower income persons on campaign issues and political party platforms, as well as the potential benefits of voting. Ergo, it is expected here that the higher the per capita personal income in a state, the higher the VPR in that state, ceteris paribus.

Furthermore, as in Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) and Cebula and Toma (2006), it is hypothesized in this study that the higher the average level of educational attainment in a state, the higher may be the expected benefits from voting, ceteris paribus. Arguably, the greater the level of one’s educational attainment, the greater may be one’s knowledge of and appreciation of the significance of participating in the voting dimension of the democratic process. Furthermore, higher levels of educational attainment could well (a) engender a higher level of understanding of those issues being decided by or at least influenced through the act of voting and/or (b) result in a better informed electorate in terms of candidates’ qualifications, character, and prior voting records and political philosophies. Cebula and Toma (2006, p. 35) even argue that “Greater average levels of education may lead to the subjective evaluation that voting per se yields…benefits…insofar as voting may serve to…create the feeling of helping to maintain the vitality and survival of the democratic process…” Indeed, higher levels of educational achievement could very well help to enhance the degree to which voters derive subjective benefits from fulfilling their “civic duty” in the voting booth. Accordingly, it is hypothesized in this study that the greater the percentage of the population in a state with at least a high school diploma (HSANDMORE), the higher the VPR in the state, ceteris paribus.
As for the costs or expected costs of voting, two factors are introduced initially. To begin with, consider the potential voting impact of the overall average cost of living (COST) in a state. It is argued here that the higher the overall cost of living in a state, the more challenging it is for families to “make ends meet,” *ceteris paribus*. This is because higher living costs tend to impose greater demands/pressures on family time in terms of challenging the ability to pay the family bills. Thus, COST can be regarded as a reflection of the opportunity cost of voting. Stated a bit differently, the higher the level of COST in a state, the greater the sacrifice it may become to participate in voting (no less becoming an informed voter). Moreover, a higher level of COST would likely reflect an environment with higher pecuniary transit/transportation costs *per se* for the prospective voter, thereby effectively elevating the pecuniary costs *per se* of voting. It is therefore hypothesized that, *ceteris paribus*, the higher the COST in a state, the lower the VPR in that state. This hypothesis has not been tested in the literature to date. The second cost-of-voting factor is represented by a measure of the potential temporal (and perhaps even to some degree, the pecuniary) cost of going to the polls and back. To measure this potential cost, albeit somewhat crudely, consider the variable URBAN, which is the percentage of the population in a state that resides in urban areas. It is argued here that the greater the degree of urbanization, the more costly it is to exercise the right to vote because increased urbanization implies more traffic congestion on the streets and highways and more congestion for both private and public transportation. Such congestion imposes costs in terms of the value of lost time. The more time required to travel, the greater the *temporal* costs of the voting process. Indeed, it is also possible that a greater degree of urbanization and congestion also may imply that additional *pecuniary* costs of voting may be experienced in terms of greater gasoline consumption, greater depreciation of automobiles, and so forth. As a result, it is hypothesized that the greater the percent of a state’s population residing in urban areas, the greater the temporal (and perhaps even the pecuniary) costs of voting and hence the lower the VPR in that state, *ceteris paribus*.

Based upon the arguments above, equation (1) can be restated as:

\[
\begin{align*}
EGB &= g(\text{LEGREF}, \text{POPREF}, \text{INIT}, \text{FLFPR}, \text{UR}, \text{AGE}, \text{HISP}, \text{PCPERSINC}, \text{HSANDMORE}), \\
g_{\text{LEGREF}} &> 0, g_{\text{POPREF}} > 0, g_{\text{INIT}} > 0, g_{\text{FLFPR}} > 0, g_{\text{UR}} > 0, g_{\text{AGE}} > 0, g_{\text{HISP}} < 0, g_{\text{PCPERSINC}} > 0, \\
g_{\text{HSANDMORE}} &> 0
\end{align*}
\]  

(2)

\[
\begin{align*}
EGC &= h(\text{COST}, \text{URBAN}), h_{\text{COST}} &> 0, h_{\text{URBAN}} > 0
\end{align*}
\]  

(3)

Based upon (1), (2), and (3), it follows that the voter participation rate (VPR) function is given by:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{VPR} &= j(\text{LEGREF}, \text{POPREF}, \text{INIT}, \text{FLFPR}, \text{UR}, \text{AGE}, \text{HISP}, \text{PCPERSINC}, \text{HSANDMORE}, \\
\text{COST}, \text{URBAN}), j_{\text{LEGREF}} &> 0, j_{\text{POPREF}} > 0, j_{\text{INIT}} > 0, j_{\text{FLFPR}} > 0, j_{\text{UR}} > 0, j_{\text{AGE}} > 0, j_{\text{HISP}} < 0, \\
j_{\text{PCPERSINC}} &> 0, j_{\text{HSANDMORE}} > 0, j_{\text{COST}} < 0, j_{\text{URBAN}} < 0
\end{align*}
\]  

(4)
3. Empirical Analysis

Since this study is focused upon the total number of legislative referenda plus popular referenda plus initiatives combined, the symbols LEGREF, POPREF, and INIT are replaced in our reduced-form equation by the symbol BALLOTOT, where BALLOTOT = LEGREF + POPREF + INIT. Following the model summarized in (4), then the following reduced-form equation is to be estimated:

\[ VPR_k = a_0 + a_1 \text{BALLOTOT}_k + a_2 \text{HISP}_k + a_3 \text{UR}_k + a_4 \text{FLFPR}_k + a_5 \text{AGE}_k + a_6 \text{PCPERSINC}_k + a_7 \text{HSANDMORE}_k + a_8 \text{COST}_k + a_9 \text{URBAN}_k + u \]  

(5)

where

- VPR<sub>k</sub> = the voter participation rate in state k in the 2004 Presidential election, expressed as a percent of eligible voters in the state [as in, e.g., Cebula and Toma (2006), Cebula and Tullock (2006)];
- a<sub>0</sub> = constant term;
- BALLOTOT<sub>k</sub> = the total number of statewide legislative referenda on the ballot in state k in year 2004 plus the total number of statewide popular referenda on the ballot in state k in year 2004 plus the total number of statewide initiatives on the ballot in state k in year 2004;
- HISP<sub>k</sub> = the percentage of the population in state k that was classified as Hispanic in the year 2002;
- UR<sub>k</sub> = the average percentage unemployment rate of the civilian labor force in state k in the year 2003;
- FLFPR<sub>k</sub> = the female labor force participation rate in state k in the year 2002, expressed as a percent;
- AGE<sub>k</sub> = the percent of state k’s population in year 2003 that was age 65 or older;
- PCPERSINC<sub>k</sub> = per capita personal income in state k in current dollars in the year 2003;
- HSANDMORE<sub>k</sub> = the percentage of the adult population in state k age 25 years and older with at least a high school diploma, 2003;
- COST<sub>k</sub> = an index of the average cost of living for a four-person family residing in state k, 2003;
- URBAN<sub>k</sub> = percent of state k’s total population residing in urban areas in 2003;
- u = stochastic error term.
The analysis deals with the 2004 Presidential election, the most recent Presidential election experience to date. To measure “direct democracy,” the sum of the three variables for 2004 is adopted. The data source for these direct democracy measures is the Initiative & Referendum Institute (2004, pp. 9-10). All of the right-hand-side variables are lagged so as to avoid simultaneity bias and in such a fashion as to minimize the incidence of multicollinearity. The data source for the voter participation rate is the U.S. Census Bureau, (2006): http://www.uselectionatlas.org/USPRESIDENT/vto.php?year=2004&datatype=national. The data for the other variables were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau (2003, Tables 22, 592; 2005, Tables 574, 18, 20, 216; 2006, Tables 27, 662) and ACCRA (2003). Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations of all of the variables in the analysis.

Estimating equation (5) by OLS with the White (1980) heteroskedasticity correction, yields equation (6):

\[
\text{VPR}_k = -63.66 + 0.148 \text{BALLOTOT}_k - 0.127 \text{HISP}_k + 3.22 \text{UR}_k + 0.752 \text{FLFPR}_k \\
+ 0.98 \text{AGE}_k + 0.00068 \text{PCPERSINC}_k + 0.751 \text{HSANDMORE}_k \\
- 0.256 \text{COST}_k - 0.188 \text{URBAN}_k, R^2 = 0.83, \text{adjR}^2 = 0.79, F = 21.79
\]

In equation (6), all nine of the estimated coefficients on explanatory variables exhibit the expected signs, with seven being statistically significant at beyond the one percent level and one being statistically significant at the five percent level. Among these results, the estimated coefficient on the composite measure of direct democracy is significant at the 2.5 percent level with the hypothesized positive sign. The coefficient of determination is 0.83, so that the model explains between four-fifths and five-sixths of the variation in the voter participation rate. Finally, the F-statistic is significant at beyond the one percent level, attesting to the overall strength of the model.

According to equation (6), the estimated coefficient on the FLFPR variable is positive and significant at the one percent level. This result implies that the VPR is an increasing function of the female labor force participation rate, as hypothesized. As found in Cebula and Toma (2006), the coefficient on the UR variable is positive and significant at the one percent level, implying (as hypothesized) that voter turnout is an increasing function of the unemployment rate, presumably because of expressive voting [Copeland and Laband (2002)] The coefficient on the AGE variable is positive and significant at the one percent level, implying (as expected) that the greater the percentage of the population age 65 and older, the greater the VPR will be. The estimated coefficient on the HISP variable is negative and but statistically significant at barely the ten percent level, implying only very weakly that the VPR is a decreasing function of the percent of the population that is Hispanic. As for the PCPERSINC variable, it exhibits the expected positive sign and is significant at the one percent level, implying that higher income persons tend to be more likely to vote [Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960)]. The estimated coefficient on the HSANDMORE variable is positive (as hypothesized) and significant.
at the one percent level, implying that the greater the proportion of the population with a high school diploma or more, the higher the voter turnout. This is consistent with arguments in Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960). The estimated coefficients on the COST and URBAN variables are both negative and statistically significant at the one percent level, implying that the VPR is a decreasing function of both COST and URBAN. These findings imply that a higher living-cost level is likely to discourage lower voter turnout, as will a greater degree of urbanization, because the higher the cost of living and the greater the degree of urbanization, ceteris paribus, the greater the expected (and actual) costs of voting may be.

Finally, there are the results for the consolidated “direct democracy” variable, BALLOTOT. The sign on the estimated coefficient for the BALLOTOT variable is positive, as hypothesized, and significant at beyond the 2.5 percent level. Thus, the greater the number of statewide legislative referenda on the ballot, the greater the VPR. Clearly, this composite measure of direct democracy appears to induce an increase in the voter participation rate. This finding is consistent with Tolbert and Smith (2005).

4. Conclusion

Direct democracy, in theory, is supposed to energize the electorate and increase voter turnout. In this study for the year 2004, this theory is affirmed. Specifically, the sum of the number of statewide legislative referenda plus the number of statewide popular referenda plus the number of statewide initiatives combined appears to raise voter turnout. Presumably, then, direct democracy overall appears to raise both the expected gross and net benefits of voting and thereby appears to elevate the voter participation rate. The strength of these findings notwithstanding, further research into this topic would seem advisable in order to track the impact of direct democracy on voter turnout over time, especially since the aggregate voter turnout trend has largely been downwards over the last four decades.

Endnote

* Shirley and Philip Solomons Eminent Scholar, Department of Economics, Armstrong Atlantic State University, and Research Associate, Department of Economics, Armstrong Atlantic State University, respectively.

References


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the 50 States

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<td>PCPERSINC</td>
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<td>HISP</td>
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<td>BALLOTOT</td>
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