Hurricane Names, Candidate Exposure, and Voter Choices *

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This version: February 2025

Abstract: We show that, in contrast to classic models of voting and political advertising, mere exposure to (and thus familiarity with) a candidate may lead to greater support. Using data from Louisiana local elections, U.S. state legislature elections, and Atlantic tropical storm names from 1980 to 2022, we find that down-ballot candidates experience an increase in vote share of 7.1–10.4 percentage points when a hurricane with the same name impacts the state prior to the election. This effect persists after accounting for the inherent popularity of specific names and potential strategic candidate responses. Our result contributes to the understanding of political campaigning and, more broadly, advertising markets.

Keywords: Political persuasion, candidate exposure, familiarity-based attention, voter preference, hurricane names

JEL Codes: D72, D91, M30, Q54

*We are indebted to Raymond Fisman for his continuous guidance, advice, and support. We would also like to thank Ernesto Dal Bó, Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, James Feigenbaum, Siddharth George, Justin Hong, Ilyana Kuziemko, Eliana La Ferrara, Kevin Lang, Erzo F.P. Luttmer, Benjamin Marx, Sultan Mehmood, Dilip Mookherjee, Daniele Paserman, Spencer Piston, Johannes Schmieder, Linh T. Tô, and the participants at YES (Yale 2022) and EPOVB Conference (FSU 2023) for helpful comments. We thank Yi Chen and Di Kang for their excellent research assistance. All errors are our own.

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1 Introduction

Political candidates pour substantial resources into increasing their exposure to voters, including but not limited to political advertising and campaigning. Consistent with classic theory on rational voting (Downs, 1957), candidate exposure serves to to convey *information* about a given set of policies (López-Moctezuma et al., 2022). Beyond information transmission, exposure may benefit politicians as voters tend to pay more *attention* to familiar candidates, increasing their chances of being considered at the ballot box. This idea of familiarity-based attention is supported by psychological research – for example, people are better at noticing letter sequences that resemble familiar English words than unfamiliar ones (Christie and Klein, 1995) and at recognizing their content (Miller, Bruner and Postman, 1954; Baron and Estes, 1978).[1] However, the role of familiarity in shaping political choices remains less explored. This paper provides evidence that candidate exposure can directly influence voter decisions, consistent with the mechanism of familiarity-based attention. In particular, exposure to candidate names plays a surprisingly prominent role in shaping voter choices in down-ballot elections.

Familiarity-based attention may help explain various prominent political phenomena, including incumbency advantage (Prior, 2006), political dynasties (Rossi, 2017), celebrity politicians (Xiong, 2021), and political advertising (Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2018). However, isolating and quantifying this effect in real-world electoral politics is challenging because candidate exposure is often intertwined with information that can directly influence voter beliefs. While field experiments could randomly deliver uninformative messages to voters to increase candidate exposure, the act of sending these messages may itself signal a candidate's competence, thereby altering voter perceptions. This complexity helps explain the limited empirical evidence in the literature on how familiarity directly influences election results.

We address this identification challenge by leveraging the unique naming system of hurricanes, which is unrelated to elections yet can increase the familiarity of certain candidates' names among voters. In 1979, the World Meteorological Association introduced six permanent

[1] Familiarity-based attention extends beyond letter and word perception. Recent psychological studies show that people detect and recognize the features of images (Cohen, Sung and Alaoui, 2024), patterns (Yang and Beck, 2023), and human faces (Ramon and Gobbini, 2018) more quickly and accurately when they are familiar.

name lists for Atlantic tropical storms (Figure A1). Each list contains an equal distribution of women's and men's (first) names (e.g., Alberto, Beryl, Chris, Debby). These lists operate on a rotating schedule, with each being recycled every six years. During each hurricane season, names are assigned sequentially to storms based on their order of occurrence. Consequently, all storms are assigned names that were predetermined in 1979. Given the exogenous timing and trajectory of hurricanes, the probability that a candidate with a hurricane-eligible name shares a name with a hurricane affecting their state before the election (hereafter referred to as a same-name candidate) is plausibly exogenous.

Hurricanes have a major societal impact, causing significant economic and social disruptions (Emanuel, 2005; Strobl, 2011; Deryugina, 2017; Gallagher and Hartley, 2017; Young and Hsiang, 2024). As a hurricane nears landfall, it captures significant attention from local media and communities, warning residents of potential dangers and often prompting evacuations (Kaplan, Spenkuch and Yuan, 2019). This heightened focus naturally increases residents' familiarity with the hurricane's name and may influence their perception of it (Jung et al., 2014). However, such familiarity is unlikely to affect voters' opinions of a same-name candidate for two reasons: (1) a hurricane's landfall is objectively unrelated to a candidate's competence or policies, and (2) most voters are unfamiliar with candidates in down-ballot elections and typically make decisions about these races only upon receiving their ballot. As voters are unlikely to consciously associate a politically irrelevant hurricane with same-name candidates, any observed effect of sharing a name on vote share is most plausibly driven by unconscious attention to familiar names.

This paper focuses on sub-national elections, which represent the vast majority of elected offices in the United States: apart from 542 federal offices, all other elected officials in the U.S. assume office through state or local elections. The country has approximately 90,000 local governments (Warshaw, 2019), collectively responsible for managing nearly one-quarter of the nation's public budget (Anzia, 2022). Sub-national elections typically receive limited media attention, leading voters to make decisions in a low-information environment, heightening the relevance of the mere-exposure effect (Kam and Zechmeister, 2013; Sides, Vavreck and Warshaw, 2021). This study examines this effect using local election data from Louisiana

for two main reasons. First, amidst the scarcity of local election records in the U.S. (Anzia and Bernhard, 2022), Louisiana stands out as the only state that (1) experiences hurricanes frequently, averaging one every two years, and (2) provides publicly available election results dating back to 1982, closely aligning with the 1979 reform of the hurricane naming system. To enhance external validity, the paper further extends its analysis to another low-information context: U.S. state legislature elections from 1980 to 2022.

Using data from sub-national elections, including Louisiana local elections (1982–2022) and U.S. state legislature elections (1980–2022), we provide robust evidence that sharing a candidate's name with a hurricane making local landfall significantly increases their vote share. Our main findings remain consistent after controlling for incumbent status, ballot order, year-name fixed effects, state-name fixed effects, and office fixed effects. To rule out the possibility that these results occur by chance, we conduct randomization and placebo tests, including analyses of hurricanes occurring after the election and hurricanes striking other states. While the effect is short-lived, it is amplified for stronger hurricanes and names that are less common.

We also investigate an alternative explanation—strategic candidate responses. First, we show that races featuring same-name candidates are not associated with higher voter turnout. This lack of a mobilization effect suggests that same-name candidates may not use the occurrence of hurricanes to mobilize voters. This finding is consistent with typical voter behavior in down-ballot elections, where decisions are often made only upon receiving the ballot. Next, we examine the extensive margin of candidate responses, specifically candidate entry. We analyze whether hurricanes lead lower-performing same-name candidates to withdraw from the election by assessing the number of same-name candidates running for office. We find no evidence of such compositional changes, further reinforcing our conclusions. Collectively, these findings indicate that candidate exposure can significantly influence voter choices in low-information elections, directly shaping candidate support.

This paper mainly contributes to ongoing discussions of how political persuasion works. Two models dominate theories of political persuasion: belief-based models, in which candidate exposure affects voters' beliefs, and non-belief-based models, in which uninformative mes-

sages affect voters' choices independently of beliefs (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010). Each one has distinct policy and welfare implications: while more information improves welfare for rational voters (Kamenica and Gentzkow, 2011), political persuasion can also harm voter welfare if it merely directs attention to a small group of favored candidates. The previous literature (Wolfers, 2002; DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Dewan, Humphreys and Rubenson, 2014; Levy and Razin, 2015; Kendall, Nannicini and Trebbi, 2015; Bagues and Esteve-Volart, 2016; Ajzenman and Durante, 2022; López-Moctezuma et al., 2022) has focused primarily on voters' beliefs. For example, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) argued that overreaction to signals explains how media exposure affects voters. While we also focus on behavioral voters, this paper is the first to show how voters' choice patterns are directly changed by candidate exposure, even with minimal useful information provided. This result echoes the long-standing theory in behavioral economics that channels like salience, attention, and associative reasoning influence the result of persuasion (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010; Mullainathan, Schwartzstein and Shleifer, 2008). This finding provides novel insights into the additional votes for candidates with more exposure, such as incumbents (Gelman and King, 1990; Prior, 2006; Gasper and Reeves, 2011), those from a political dynasty (Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder, 2009; Rossi, 2017; George, 2020), or those who heavily invest in political advertising (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Ashworth, Clinton et al., 2007; Krasno and Green, 2008; Gerber et al., 2011; Da Silveira and De Mello, 2011; Gordon and Hartmann, 2013; Kendall, Nannicini and Trebbi, 2015; Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2018; Sides, Vavreck and Warshaw, 2021).

Our work also directly speaks to the literature on the effect of name recognition on voting (Kam and Zechmeister, 2013; Fukumoto and Miwa, 2018). We document a positive effect of name recognition on the vote share in real-world, low-information elections in the U.S. More importantly, we show that the effect of name recognition exists even in the presence of informative shortcut cues (e.g., partisanship). Lastly, unlike prior studies, our research setting allows us to isolate a specific mechanism: mere exposure to candidate names makes those candidates more salient and thus more likely to be chosen.

2 Data and Empirical Strategy

2.1 Data Sets

Our paper primarily utilizes three datasets: Louisiana local election data, U.S. state legislature election data, and Atlantic hurricane data.

Data on Louisiana elections for state and local offices from 1982 to 2022 were obtained from the Louisiana Secretary of State's Office website.[2] State offices include positions such as Governor, State Senator, State Representative, Secretary of State, State Board or Commission Member, and Assessor. We exclude gubernatorial elections as they are relatively high-profile elections. Local offices include positions such as Mayor, City Council Member, Sheriff, School Board Member, Police Juror, Justice of the Peace, and Local Board or Commission Member. During the sample period, there were 28,305 elections and 78,859 candidates.[3] The dataset contains detailed information, including candidate names, the number of votes received, party affiliations, the office being contested, election dates, and more.

Candidates running for U.S. state legislature elections are drawn from the State Legislative Election Returns dataset (Klarner, 2023). This dataset includes information on 204,720 candidates who contested U.S. state legislature elections between 1980 and 2022. State legislature elections are generally held biennially in even-numbered years. The dataset provides candidate names, the number of votes received, party affiliations, district information, election dates, incumbent status, and other relevant details.

Historical hurricane data were obtained from the Hurricane Research Division of NOAA.[4] Hurricanes are relatively infrequent: there were 16 hurricanes in the 1980s, 14 in the 1990s, 19 in the 2000s, and 13 in the 2010s. Figure 1 illustrates the number of hurricanes that impacted each state during the sample period. While some states in the U.S. never experience hurricanes, states like Florida and Louisiana are hit relatively often. During the sample period, Louisiana was struck by 19 hurricanes, but only seven—Andrew, Barry, Cindy, Danny, Humberto, Juan,

[2] Available at: https://voterportal.sos.la.gov.
[3] Uncontested elections are excluded from the analysis.
[4] Available at https://www.aoml.noaa.gov.

and Laura—shared a forename with any local candidates during the year they hit Louisiana. This is partly because some hurricane names are uncommon (e.g., Gustav), while others are not first names at all (e.g., Delta and Zeta).[5] Additionally, some popular hurricane names coincided with years when there were few or no elections in Louisiana. As a result, sharing a name with a hurricane is a rare event, with only 22 candidates sharing a hurricane's name during the year they ran for office in Louisiana.[6] In later analysis, we will pay particular attention to the robustness of our statistical analysis. Our randomization tests show that the result is unlikely to be a coincidence of the draw for these 22 specific candidates.

To further assess the external validity of our findings, we extend our analysis to U.S. state legislature elections. In this context, nine hurricanes share a name with 41 candidates who ran for office during the year the hurricane hit their state. Table A1 provides a comprehensive list of hurricanes from 1980 to 2022 and the number of candidates sharing their name in either Louisiana local elections or state legislature elections.

2.2 Empirical Strategy

We begin with the following basic specification to examine whether down-ballot candidates who share a name with a hurricane that struck their state within 180 days prior to the election receive a larger vote share:

$$voteshare_{ir} = \alpha_f + \beta_1 samename_{ir} + \pi_t + \epsilon_{ir} \tag{1}$$

where $voteshare_{ir}$ is the vote share candidate i received in race r. $samename_{ir}$ is a dummy variable indicating whether candidate i shares the same (first) name with any hurricanes that hit their state 180 days before race r. We control for first-name fixed effects α_f and year fixed effects π_t. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level.

Although the timing and path of a hurricane are random, names that appear on hurricane name lists might be particularly popular. We first investigate whether candidates with

[5] The Greek alphabet was used during the 2020 hurricane season after the official list of names was exhausted.

[6] We also account for name variants; for instance, a candidate named Laurie would be considered to share a name with Hurricane Laura.

a hurricane-eligible name have higher vote shares during normal years. Table A2 reports the results, and we find no significant difference in the vote shares of candidates with a hurricane-eligible name compared to other candidates. Nonetheless, including first-name fixed effects is essential to the analysis, as it controls for the popularity of specific first names in electoral politics. Our identifying assumption is that the timing of a candidate sharing a name with a hurricane that hits a state is exogenous. This assumption holds in our context because hurricanes occur exogenously, and the name list for hurricanes in any given year was predetermined in 1979. Consequently, our coefficient of interest, β_1, can be estimated without bias, conditional on the inclusion of first-name fixed effects.

We will further proceed with our preferred specification, incorporating additional controls to explore whether the results remain consistent with the baseline specification. Specifically, for local elections in Louisiana, we will estimate the following specification:

$$voteshare_{ir} = \alpha_f + \beta_1 samename_{ir} + \beta_2 incumbent_{ir} + \pi_t + \pi_o + \pi_p + \epsilon_{ir} \tag{2}$$

In addition to the first-name fixed effects and year fixed effects included in equation 1, we incorporate party fixed effects (π_p) and office fixed effects (π_o) to account for differences across contests for different offices.[7] We also include incumbent status, a key variable that significantly influences vote share in down-ballot elections.[8]

For state legislature elections, we can further leverage the spatial patterns of hurricane

[7]Throughout this paper, we use "office" to refer to a position and "race" or "office-year" to refer to a contest for a specific office in a given year. There are approximately 6,000 offices in Louisiana. For state elections in Louisiana, "office" refers to the general title of the position—for example, Attorney General, Secretary of State, etc. For local elections, "office" refers to the specific title of the position—for instance, Chief of Police – City of Abbeville, Chief of Police – City of Baker, Chief of Police – City of Breaux Bridge, etc.

[8]The incumbent status is not directly provided in the Louisiana local election data. Therefore, we construct the variable $incumbent$ by checking whether a candidate was the winner of the previous race for the same office in our dataset. However, this measurement may be imperfect if a candidate ran unopposed in the previous election, as unopposed contests are not included in the dataset. Additionally, the variable $incumbent$ is missing for candidates during the first four years of our sample due to the lack of historical records. As a result, our estimate of $incumbent$ is likely to be underestimated.

paths to estimate the following specification:

$$voteshare_{ir} = \alpha_{sf} + \beta_1 samename_{ir} + \beta_2 incumbent_{ir} + \pi_{tf} + \pi_o + \pi_p + \epsilon_{ir} \quad (3)$$

where π_{tf} represents year-name fixed effects, allowing comparisons between candidates with the same first name running for office in the same year, some of whom are in states affected by a same-name hurricane and others in states not impacted by the same-name hurricane. α_{sf} represents state-name fixed effects, enabling comparisons among candidates with the same first name within a state and leveraging the timing of same-name hurricanes hitting the state. This approach is similar to the variation used in Louisiana local elections but extends to all U.S. continental states. Office fixed effects π_o, party fixed effects π_p, and incumbent status are also included in the model. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level.

3 Results

3.1 Main Results

Table 1 presents our main results. Panel A reports the findings for Louisiana local elections. The coefficient on $samename$ in Column (1) indicates that sharing a name with a hurricane has a highly significant and positive impact on a candidate's vote share in down-ballot elections, corresponding to a 9.8-percentage point increase. Given the very small fraction of same-name candidates among all candidates, we further restrict our analysis to 1,863 candidates with hurricane-eligible names in Column (2) to ensure a more comparable comparison. The results remain robust even with this more comparable sample.

In Column (3), we present the results estimated from our preferred specification, which includes additional control variables. The magnitude is very similar to that in the baseline specification. Candidates who share the same name as a hurricane hitting Louisiana before the election receive a 10.4-percentage point higher vote share. Notably, this magnitude is comparable to the incumbency advantage observed in this setting.[9] In Column (4), we examine

[9]This comparison should be interpreted with caution, as the incumbency advantage is likely underestimated in this context due to the exclusion of uncontested elections from our analysis.

whether candidates in Louisiana are affected when they share a name with a hurricane that struck other states but not Louisiana. We find that hurricanes impacting other states do not influence same-name candidates in Louisiana. This finding aligns with the fact that hurricanes striking other states are unlikely to receive significant attention in Louisiana and, therefore, do not increase Louisiana voters' familiarity with the hurricane's name.

To better contextualize the magnitude of our findings, we compare them to a well-documented benchmark: the ballot order effect. Both the ballot order effect and incumbency advantage have been shown to significantly influence vote share (Koppell and Steen, 2004; Augenblick and Nicholson, 2016; Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Gelman and King, 1990; Prior, 2006; de Benedictis-Kessner, 2018). In Louisiana, candidate names are listed alphabetically by surname. If surname order is uncorrelated with forenames, its inclusion should not affect our main results. To test this, we introduce a dummy variable in Column (5) indicating whether a candidate appears first on the ballot. Our main results remain unchanged with the inclusion of ballot order, and we find that first-listed candidates receive a 5.8-percentage-point increase in vote share.[10] The inclusion of ballot order and incumbent status also helps us alleviate the concern that our results may coincidentally capture the ballot order effect or incumbency advantage due to the small sample of treated observations. Our findings provide robust evidence of the same-name effect, which is comparable in magnitude to the incumbency advantage and surpasses the ballot order effect in this context. This underscores the surprisingly strong influence of mere exposure in shaping voter decisions in low-level elections.

To assess the external validity of our main findings, we extend our analysis to U.S. state legislature elections. The results are presented in Panel B of Table 1. Column (1) reports the results from our baseline specification, which includes only first-name fixed effects and year fixed effects. Reassuringly, the same-name effect estimated in this alternative low-information setting, using state elections across the U.S., is largely consistent with what we observed in Louisiana local elections. In Column (2), we further restrict our analysis to 33,001 candidates with hurricane-eligible name running for state legislature elections, and the results remain

[10]However, since ballot order is not randomly assigned, it is worth noting that we do not estimate the causal effect of being listed first.

consistent. Column (3) presents results from our preferred specification, indicating that state legislature candidates who share the same name as a hurricane hitting their state before the election receive a 7.1-percentage point higher vote share. This magnitude is slightly lower than that observed in Louisiana local elections, potentially because state legislature elections are slightly higher-profile, and voters are more familiar with the candidates. In this setting, the incumbent status is measured more accurately, and we find that the same-name effect is approximately 28.5% of the incumbency advantage.

In Column (4), we examine whether hurricanes influence same-name candidates in states where they do not make landfall. We find no evidence of such an effect. This finding confirms that the salience of a hurricane's name generally increases in the state it impacts but not in states it does not affect, and therefore has no impact on same-name candidates in other states. In the final column, we compare our results to another benchmark: the incumbent (dis)advantage following natural disasters (Healy and Malhotra, 2009, 2010; Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Achen and Bartels, 2017; Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita and Friedenberg, 2018).[11] There is no consensus in the literature on how voters behave after natural disasters. The "blind retrospection" theory suggests that voters indiscriminately blame incumbents for the pain they experience. Conversely, the "attentive electorate" theory proposes that voters may reward politicians in power in subsequent elections based on their responses to natural disasters. We find that incumbents, on average, receive 1.7 percentage points more votes following a hurricane affecting their states.

Randomization Tests — To carefully evaluate whether the observed results are purely coincidental or driven by a specific combination of candidates, we perform a randomization test by randomly assigning same-name status to candidates. Table A1 shows that, during the sample period, five Andrews, five Barrys, four Lauras, three Dannys, three Juans, one Cindy, and one Humberto in Louisiana local elections shared their names with hurricanes. To

[11] We do not use the ballot order effect as a benchmark in this setting because different states adopt varying ballot order rules (Li, 2022). While some states, like Louisiana, use an alphabetically ordered ballot, a significant portion employs other methods, including randomized or rotating ballot orders. This variation makes it challenging to construct a consistent measurement of ballot order for candidates running in state legislature elections.

maintain this composition of first names, we randomly select five Andrews, five Barrys, four Lauras, three Dannys, three Juans, one Cindy, and one Humberto from the entire sample and assign them false same-name status. Using this falsified same-name variable, we estimate the "effect" using the preferred specification. As these randomly selected candidates did not share their names with any hurricane in the years they ran for office, we expect the estimated effect to be close to zero. To enhance statistical power, we repeat the randomization test 1,000 times.

Panel A of Figure A2 presents the distribution of estimates from 1,000 randomization runs, alongside the baseline estimate of 0.104 from column (3) in Table 1. The mean of the randomization distribution is -0.003, with a standard deviation of 0.037, indicating no effect when the same-name status is randomly assigned. Notably, the baseline estimate ranks 7^{th} among the 1,000 runs. A similar randomization test was conducted for state legislature elections using the same composition of first names in the sample (i.e., 17 Michaels, 9 Matthews, 4 Allens, 4 Charleys, 3 Georges, 1 Alex, 1 Diana, 1 Nicole, and 1 Hanna). Again, as shown in Panel B of Figure A2, the mean of the randomization distribution is very close to 0, with the baseline estimate of 0.071 ranking 5^{th} among the 1,000 runs. Together, these results provide strong evidence that the positive and significant effect of sharing a name with a hurricane on a candidate's vote share in both settings is real and unlikely to occur by chance.

3.2 Additional Results

Having established the robust baseline effects of sharing a name with hurricanes on a candidate's vote share, we now turn our attention to providing additional results to better understand this same-name effect.

We first investigate whether candidates with rare names gain a higher vote share in the presence of a same-name hurricane. Rare names are less common and thus stand out more due to the distinctiveness effect. If a hurricane with a rare name dominates the news cycle, it could amplify the distinctiveness of candidates sharing that name, making them more memorable or noticeable. To measure state-year-level name frequency, we use data on baby names from Social Security Card applications. This dataset includes all first names in each state with a minimum frequency of five. The results are reported in Columns (1) and (4) of Table 2. We

find suggestive evidence that candidates with rare first names (i.e., low name frequency) gain a higher vote share than candidates with more common first names in the presence of a same-name hurricane. This suggests that the name recognition effect induced by a hurricane is stronger for candidates with rarer (and otherwise less familiar) names.

We then investigate the role of hurricane strength. A hurricane that causes devastating property damage and significant loss of life is likely to attract more attention. We use two measures to capture hurricane strength: the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale and maximum wind speed (in knots). The Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale estimates potential property damage and provides a rating from 1 to 5, based solely on a hurricane's maximum sustained wind speed. The results are reported in Table 2. We find that candidates sharing the same name as a stronger hurricane receive more votes, which aligns with the expectation that stronger hurricanes are more likely to attract attention and thus make the name more salient.

Lastly, we examine whether the same-name effect persists over time in Columns (4) and (8). We find that the same-name effect is observed only shortly after the landfall of hurricanes and does not impact same-name candidates running for office in the next election cycle. This suggests that the same-name effect is short-lived, aligning with the short-term effects commonly observed in the political persuasion literature (Gerber et al., 2011). Furthermore, we conduct a placebo test and confirm that hurricanes have no impact on same-name candidates well before their occurrence.

3.3 Candidate Behavior

One potential concern with our interpretation is that sharing the same name as a recent hurricane may influence candidates' behavior. We examine two possible channels through which this effect could manifest. First, the mobilization effect suggests that same-name candidates might strategically leverage the hurricane's landfall to boost their campaigns. Second, the composition change effect posits that lower-performing same-name candidates may be more likely to withdraw from the election. Our analysis finds no evidence that hurricanes affect the behavior of same-name candidates in down-ballot elections.

The Mobilization Effect — Could the mobilization effect of a same-name candidate explain the observed increase in vote share? A same-name candidate might strategically leverage the hurricane's name to boost their visibility among voters.[12] Given that down-ballot elections often attract little public attention, such efforts could raise awareness of the entire race, thereby reducing voter roll-off and increasing turnout.[13] To investigate whether races featuring same-name candidates are associated with higher voter turnout, we estimate the following specification:

$$ln(turnout_r) = \alpha_o + \beta_1 samename\_race_r + \pi_t + \epsilon_r \tag{4}$$

where $ln(turnout_r)$ is the logarithm of the voter turnout in race r. $samename\_race_r$ is a dummy variable indicating whether race r has any same-name candidates. We control for office fixed effects and year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the office level.

The results are presented in Columns (1) and (2) of Table 3. We do not find evidence to support the mobilization effect among same-name candidates in low-information elections. Given the nature of down-ballot elections, voters often have little to no information available (Kam and Zechmeister, 2013). They may not even recognize the candidates' names before entering the voting booth. Therefore, it is unlikely that the presence of a same-name candidate in a sub-national election would mobilize a significant number of voters.

Composition Changes in the Candidate Pool — Even if same-name status could negatively impact a candidate's vote share, a positive coefficient on same-name status might still emerge if candidates at the lower end of the vote share distribution choose not to run for office, believing that sharing a name with a hurricane would harm their chances of winning. In other words, hurricanes might positively select same-name candidates who decide to run for office.

To investigate this possibility, we conduct a direct test to determine whether hurricanes reduce the number of same-name candidates running for office, using the following specification for Louisiana local elections:

[12] Relatedly, Gulzar, Robinson and Ruiz (2022) find that candidates respond to being randomly assigned the top position on the ballot by increasing campaign fundraising and spending.

[13] Voter roll-off refers to the phenomenon where voters leave down-ballot races blank, a well-documented occurrence in American politics (Wattenberg, McAllister and Salvanto, 2000; Streb, Frederick and LaFrance, 2009).

$$ratio_{ft} = \alpha_f + \beta_1 samename\_year_{ft} + \pi_t + \epsilon_{ft} \tag{5}$$

where $samename\_year_{ft}$ is a dummy variable that indicates whether the first name f corresponds to the name of any hurricane that struck Louisiana in year t. $Ratio_{ft}$ represents either the number of candidates with the first name f in year t, normalized by the total number of candidates in year t, or normalized by the total number of races in year t.[14] The specification includes year fixed effects π_t and first-name fixed effects α_f. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level.

For state legislature elections, we incorporate additional spatial variations by constructing a name-state-year panel dataset and estimating the following specification:

$$ratio_{fts} = \alpha_{fs} + \beta_1 samename\_year_{fts} + \pi_{tf} + \epsilon_{fts} \tag{6}$$

where $samename\_year_{fts}$ is a dummy variable indicating whether the first name f corresponds to the name of any hurricane that struck state s in year t. $Ratio_{fts}$ represents either the number of candidates with the first name f in year t in state s, normalized by the total number of candidates in year t in state s, or normalized by the total number of races in year t in state s. The specification includes name-year fixed effects π_{tf} and name-state fixed effects α_{fs}. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level.

The results are reported in Table 3. We find no evidence that the occurrence of a hurricane reduces the number of candidates who share its name. This finding alleviates concerns that hurricanes may alter the composition of candidates running for office. Collectively, we find that hurricanes do not influence same-name candidates' behavior, either through the extensive margin (i.e., candidate entry) or the intensive margin (i.e., mobilization effect).

[14] $Ratio1_{ft} = \frac{\#\ of\ first\ names_{ft}}{\#\ of\ candidates_t}$, and $Ratio2_{ft} = \frac{\#\ of\ first\ names_{ft}}{\#\ of\ races_t}$.

4 Discussions

4.1 Channels

The empirical analysis above suggests that a hurricane's landfall influences voter behavior in favor of candidates sharing its name. However, since a shared name with a hurricane is probabilistically independent of a candidate's personal traits, it conveys no objective information about the candidate.[15] Theoretically, voter choices may change for two reasons: drawing biased inferences from the names (*the belief-based channel*) or subconsciously focusing on names frequently mentioned in the media (*the non-belief-based channel*).

Belief-based channel – Voters may draw biased inferences about same-name candidates after a hurricane's landfall. For instance, they may exhibit *attribution bias*, mistakenly associating the hurricane's disastrous outcomes with the candidate who shares its name. This would damage the candidate's image, leading to lower vote shares—an outcome inconsistent with our results. Alternatively, voters may perceive a hurricane's arrival as a *hard-to-interpret signal* with an unclear correlation to the same-name candidate's quality. However, most theoretical and empirical findings suggest that individuals either interpret such ambiguous signals pessimistically or ignore them altogether (Shishkin and Ortoleva, 2023), which fails to explain why same-name candidates receive more votes.

Non-belief-based channel –The theory of *familiarity-based attention* suggests that people tend to pay more attention to alternatives they are familiar with because familiarity reduces the cognitive cost of processing stimuli (Barokas, 2021). Psychological research supports this idea. For example, people more easily notice letter sequences resembling familiar English words (Christie and Klein, 1995) and recognize their content more efficiently (Miller, Bruner and Postman, 1954; Baron and Estes, 1978; Williams and Morris, 2004).[16] This familiarity-based attention channel predicts that voters are more likely to notice and consider same-name can-

[15]While the landfall of hurricanes may generate signals that reveal information about the incumbents, our results are robust after controlling candidate incumbency.

[16]Familiarity-based attention extends beyond letter and word perception. For example, the brains of infants process the familiar auditory stimuli more quickly than unfamiliar ones (Thierry, Vihman and Roberts, 2003). Recent psychological research shows that people identify and process familiar images (Cohen, Sung and Alaoui, 2024), patterns (Yang and Beck, 2023), and human faces (Ramon and Gobbini, 2018) more quickly and accurately.

didates on the ballot, aligning with our main result that such candidates receive a higher vote share. This effect can be particularly pronounced in the low-stakes, low-attention environment of down-ballot elections.

More broadly, this non-belief-based channel echoes a long-standing view in behavioral economics: non-informative dimensions can shape choices through mechanisms like salience, attention, and associative reasoning (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010; Mullainathan, Schwartzstein and Shleifer, 2008). This contrasts sharply with the belief-based persuasion models that dominate the voting literature. Through this channel, messages about an election—even uninformative ones, such as a hurricane sharing a candidate's name—can influence voter behavior without altering their beliefs. Our results, therefore, provide a non-informative perspective on several key topics in political economy, including political advertising and incumbency advantage.

4.2 Implications

Political Advertising — A large body of work that straddles economics, political science, and marketing aims to estimate the causal effects of political advertising on voting behavior — voter turnout and vote choice (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Ashworth, Clinton et al., 2007; Krasno and Green, 2008; Gerber et al., 2011; Da Silveira and De Mello, 2011; Gordon and Hartmann, 2013; Kendall, Nannicini and Trebbi, 2015; Spenkuch and Toniatti, 2018; Sides, Vavreck and Warshaw, 2021).[17] With few exceptions, the existing work has provided little empirical evidence on the underlying channel through political advertisements work.[18] The mere-exposure effect highlights the importance of getting known among the voters: people can simply cast more votes for those candidates that are frequently mentioned by the media.

Incumbency Advantage — Incumbency advantage is a well-documented phenomenon in politics (Gelman and King, 1990). Gasper and Reeves (2011) find that a disaster declaration increases support for the incumbent. This may be due to higher visibility in the media after the disaster, making the incumbent more familiar to the voters. More generally, Prior (2006) shows

[17] See DellaVigna and Gentzkow (2010) and Jacobson (2015) for reviews.

[18] One exception is Kendall, Nannicini and Trebbi (2015). They find that voters who randomly received messages about the incumbent's valence or ideology updated their beliefs and supported the incumbent more.

that the spread of television in the 1960s led to a sudden increase of incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections. Since incumbents tend to be associated with more exposure, the mere-exposure effect can partially explain the incumbency advantage in elections.

Political Dynasties — Political dynasties remain ubiquitous in modern democratic societies (George, 2020). Rossi (2017) finds that the family name-recognition channel could be a mechanism behind dynastic political success. A woman in Argentina, for instance, is more likely to choose her husband's surname for political activities when married to someone with a recognized surname. The mere-exposure effect implies that voters may choose candidates with surnames they were previously exposed to.

5 Conclusion

This paper examines the impact of candidate exposure on voter choices in two real-world low-information settings in the United States: Louisiana local elections and U.S. state legislature elections. We present robust statistical evidence that, in both settings, candidates receive a higher vote share when they share a name with a hurricane that makes landfall in their state before the election. The familiarity-based attention channel proposed in this work provides a window into behavioral mechanisms driving various prominent political phenomena, such as political advertising, incumbency advantage, and political dynasties. Future research could investigate the role played by this attention-based channel in these phenomena and assess its persistence in high-profile, high-information elections.

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Tables and Figures

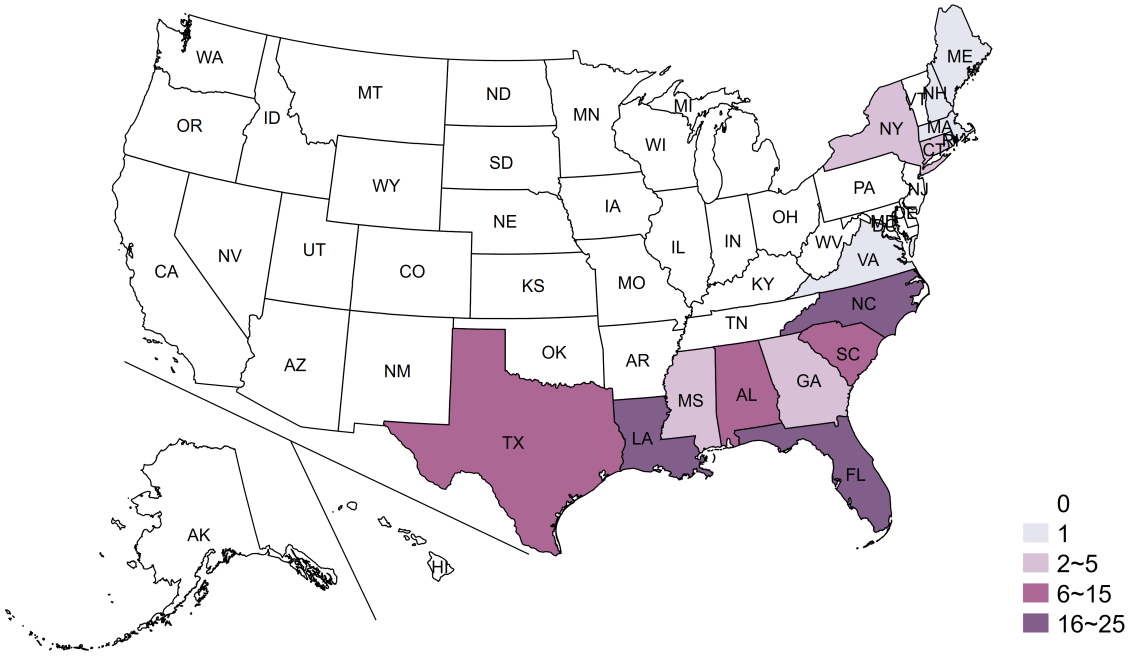

Figure 1: Number of Atlantic Hurricanes (1980–2022)

Notes: This map displays the number of Atlantic hurricanes impacting U.S. states from 1980 to 2022. The color gradient represents hurricane frequency, with light purple indicating states experiencing fewer hurricanes and dark purple indicating states experiencing the most.

[Back to Page 6]

Table 1: Baseline Results

Panel A: Louisiana Local Elections					
VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3) voteshare	(4)	(5)
samename	0.0982***	0.113***	0.104**	0.104**	0.109***
	(0.0359)	(0.0351)	(0.0406)	(0.0406)	(0.0381)
incumbent			0.112***	0.112***	0.110***
			(0.00233)	(0.00233)	(0.00232)
otherstates				0.00113	
				(0.0126)	
ballotorderfirst					0.0580***
					(0.00146)
Observations	78,859	1,863	78,859	78,859	78,859
Name FEs	X	X	X	X	X
Year FEs	X	X	X	X	X
Party FEs	.	.	X	X	X
Office FEs	.	.	X	X	X
Sample	All	Hurricane-Eligible Name Cand.	All	All	All
Panel B: State Legislature Elections					
VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3) voteshare	(4)	(5)
samename	0.104***	0.105***	0.0708***	0.0664***	0.0729**
	(0.0304)	(0.0335)	(0.0260)	(0.0215)	(0.0343)
incumbent			0.249***	0.245***	0.249***
			(0.00312)	(0.00331)	(0.000946)
otherstates				-0.00503	
				(0.00644)	
incumbent*hurr_year					0.0166***
					(0.00524)
Observations	204,720	33,001	204,720	204,720	204,720
Name FEs	X	X	.	.	.
Year FEs	X	X	.	X	.
Party FEs	.	.	X	X	X
Office FEs	.	.	X	X	X
Year-Name FEs	.	.	X	.	X
State-Name FEs	.	.	X	X	X
Sample	All	Hurricane-Eligible Name Cand.	All	All	All

Notes: This table presents the effect of sharing a name with a hurricane on a candidate's vote share. Panel A reports results for Louisiana local elections, while Panel B reports results for U.S. state legislature elections. The variable $samename$ is a dummy indicating whether a candidate shares the same (first) name as a hurricane that struck their state within 180 days before the election. Similarly, $otherstates$ is a dummy indicating whether a candidate shares the same (first) name as a hurricane that struck another state within 180 days before the election. The variable $incumbent$ is a dummy indicating whether the candidate is an incumbent, and $ballotorderfirst$ indicates whether the candidate is listed first on the ballot. The variable $hurr\_year$ indicates whether the state experienced a hurricane that year. Column (2) restricts the analysis to candidates with hurricane-eligible names. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$. [Back to Page 9]

Table 2: Additional Results

	Panel A: Louisiana Local Elections				Panel B: State Legislature Elections			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
VARIABLES	voteshare				voteshare			
samename	0.114**			0.105**	0.0872***			0.0788***
	(0.0576)			(0.0409)	(0.0259)			(0.0260)
samename*nameratio	-0.0473				-0.135*			
	(0.105)				(0.0817)			
samename_simpson		0.0267**				0.0133*		
		(0.0113)				(0.00690)		
samename_wind			0.000929***				0.000522**	
			(0.000333)				(0.000239)	
samename_pre2				0.0151				0.0542
				(0.0232)				(0.0494)
samename_pre1				0.00899				-0.00750
				(0.0258)				(0.0513)
samename_aft1				-0.0187				0.0114
				(0.0231)				(0.0331)
samename_aft2				0.0253				0.0212
				(0.0236)				(0.0288)
Observations	78,859	78,859	78,859	78,859	204,720	204,720	204,720	204,720
Name FEs	X	X	X	X	.	.	.	.
Year FEs	X	X	X	X	.	.	.	.
Party FEs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Office FEs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Year-Name FEs	.	.	.	.	X	X	X	X
State-Name FEs	.	.	.	.	X	X	X	X

Notes: This table presents additional results on the effect of sharing a name with a hurricane on a candidate's vote share. The variable $nameratio$ is a continuous measure of the proportion of a given name within the state. The variable $samename_simpson$ represents the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale of the hurricane with which the candidate shares a name, while $samename_wind$ captures the maximum wind speed (in knots) of that hurricane. The variable $samename_pre1$ is a dummy indicating whether a candidate shares a name with a hurricane that occurred one period after the election, and $samename_aft1$ is a dummy indicating whether a candidate shares a name with a hurricane that occurred one period prior to the election. Standard errors are clustered at the first-name level. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$. [Back to Page 12]

Table 3: Strategic Candidate Responses

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	ln(turnout)		ratio1		ratio2	
samename_race	-0.000644	-0.0645				
	(0.108)	(0.0680)				
samename_year			-0.00114	-0.000187	-0.000382	-9.14e-05
			(0.000746)	(0.000353)	(0.000262)	(0.000233)
Observations	27,071	121,645	210,945	15,515,948	210,945	15,515,948
Office FEs	X	X	.	.	.	.
Year FEs	X	X	X	.	X	.
Name FEs	.	.	X	.	X	.
Name-Year FEs	.	.	.	X	.	X
Name-State FEs	.	.	.	X	.	X
Sample	LA Elec.	State Elec.	LA Elec.	State Elec.	LA Elec.	State Elec.

Notes: Columns (1) and (2) present the effect of having a candidate who shares the same name as a hurricane in a race on voter turnout. Columns (3) through (6) report the results on the effect of sharing a name with a hurricane on running for office. The variable $ratio1_{fts}$ represents the number of candidates with the first name f in year t in state s, normalized by the total number of candidates in year t within state s. Similarly, $ratio2_{fts}$ denotes the number of candidates with the first name f in year t in state s, normalized by the total number of contests in year t within state s. The variable $samename\_race$ is a dummy indicating whether a race includes a same-name candidate, while $samename\_year$ is a dummy indicating whether a name was used as a hurricane name in that year. Standard errors are clustered at the contest level in columns (1) and (2) and at the name level in columns (3) through (6). *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$.

[Back to Page 14]

Online Appendix

Table A1: Continental United States Hurricane Landfalls (1980-2022)

Year	Name	States	LA Elec.	State Elec.	Year	Name	States	LA Elec.	State Elec.
1980	Allen	TX		4	2004	Gaston	SC		
1983	Alicia	TX			2004	Ivan	FL;AL		
1984	Diana	NC		1	2004	Jeanne	FL		
1985	Bob	SC			2005	Cindy	LA	1	
1985	Danny	LA	3		2005	Dennis	FL;AL		
1985	Elena	FL;AL;MS			2005	Katrina	FL;LA;AL;MS		
1985	Gloria	NC;NY;CT;NH;ME			2005	Ophelia	NC		
1985	Juan	LA	3		2005	Rita	FL;LA;TX		
1985	Kate	FL;GA			2005	Wilma	FL		
1986	Bonnie	TX			2007	Humberto	LA;TX	1	
1986	Charley	NC			2008	Dolly	TX		
1987	Floyd	FL			2008	Gustav	LA		
1988	Florence	LA			2008	Ike	LA;TX		
1989	Chantal	TX			2011	Irene	NC		
1989	Hugo	NC;SC			2012	Isaac	LA		
1989	Jerry	TX			2012	Sandy	NY		
1991	Bob	NY;CT;RI;MA			2014	Arthur	NC		
1992	Andrew	FL;LA	5		2016	Hermine	FL		
1993	Emily	NC			2016	Matthew	FL;NC;SC;GA		9
1995	Erin	FL			2017	Harvey	TX		
1995	Opal	FL;AL			2017	Irma	FL		
1996	Bertha	NC			2017	Nate	LA;MS		
1996	Fran	NC			2018	Florence	NC		
1997	Danny	LA;AL			2018	Michael	FL;GA		17
1998	Bonnie	NC			2019	Barry	LA	5	
1998	Earl	FL			2019	Dorian	NC		

Table A1 – Continued

Year	Name	States	LA Elec.	State Elec.	Year	Name	States	LA Elec.	State Elec.
1998	Georges	FL;MS		3	2020	Delta	LA		
1999	Bret	TX			2020	Hanna	TX		1
1999	Floyd	NC			2020	Isaias	NC;SC		
1999	Irene	FL;NC			2020	Laura	LA;TX	4	
2002	Lili	LA			2020	Sally	FL;AL		
2003	Claudette	TX			2020	Zeta	LA;AL;MS		
2003	Isabel	NC;VA			2021	Ida	LA		
2004	Alex	NC		1	2021	Nicholas	TX		
2004	Charley	FL;NC;SC		4	2022	Ian	FL;SC		
2004	Frances	FL			2022	Nicole	FL		1

Source: Hurricane Research Division, NOAA. Available at https://www.aoml.noaa.gov.

Notes: This table lists all hurricanes that made landfall in the Continental United States between 1980 and 2022, along with the number of candidates who shared the same name as the hurricane that struck their state within six months before the election. The column labeled "LA Elec." indicates the number of candidates in Louisiana's local elections who shared a name with the hurricane, while the column labeled "State Elec." represents the number of candidates in U.S. state legislature elections with the same name.

[Back to Page 7 or Page 11]

2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Alberto	Andrea	Arthur	Ana	Alex	Arlene
Beryl	Barry	Bertha	Bill	Bonnie	Bret
Chris	Chantal	Cristobal	Claudette	Colin	Cindy
Debby	Dexter	Dolly	Danny	Danielle	Don
Ernesto	Erin	Edouard	Elsa	Earl	Emily
Francine	Fernand	Fay	Fred	Farrah	Franklin
Gordon	Gabrielle	Gonzalo	Grace	Gaston	Gert
Helene	Humberto	Hanna	Henri	Hermine	Harold
Isaac	Imelda	Isaias	Imani	Idris	Idalia
Joyce	Jerry	Josephine	Julian	Julia	Jose
Kirk	Karen	Kyle	Kate	Karl	Katia
Leslie	Lorenzo	Leah	Larry	Lisa	Lee
Milton	Melissa	Marco	Mindy	Martin	Margot
Nadine	Nestor	Nana	Nicholas	Nicole	Nigel
Oscar	Olga	Omar	Odette	Owen	Ophelia
Patty	Pablo	Paulette	Peter	Paula	Philippe
Rafael	Rebekah	Rene	Rose	Richard	Rina
Sara	Sebastien	Sally	Sam	Shary	Sean
Tony	Tanya	Teddy	Teresa	Tobias	Tammy
Valerie	Van	Vicky	Victor	Virginie	Vince
William	Wendy	Wilfred	Wanda	Walter	Whitney

Figure A1: Six name lists of Atlantic tropical storms

Source: National Hurricane Center, NOAA. Available at https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutnames.shtm.

[Back to Page 3]

Table A2: Vote Share of Candidates with Hurricane-Eligible Names

	(1)	(2)
VARIABLES	voteshare	
hurr_eligible_name	-0.000620	-0.00119
	(0.00356)	(0.00185)
Observations	77,186	156,005
Office-Year FEs	X	X
Party FEs	X	X
Sample	LA Elec.	State Elec.

Notes: This table reports the vote share of candidates with hurricane-eligible names. The variable $hurr\_eligible\_name$ is a dummy indicating whether a candidate has a hurricane-eligible name. All columns include a control for incumbent status. Standard errors are clustered at the contest level. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$.

[Back to Page 8]

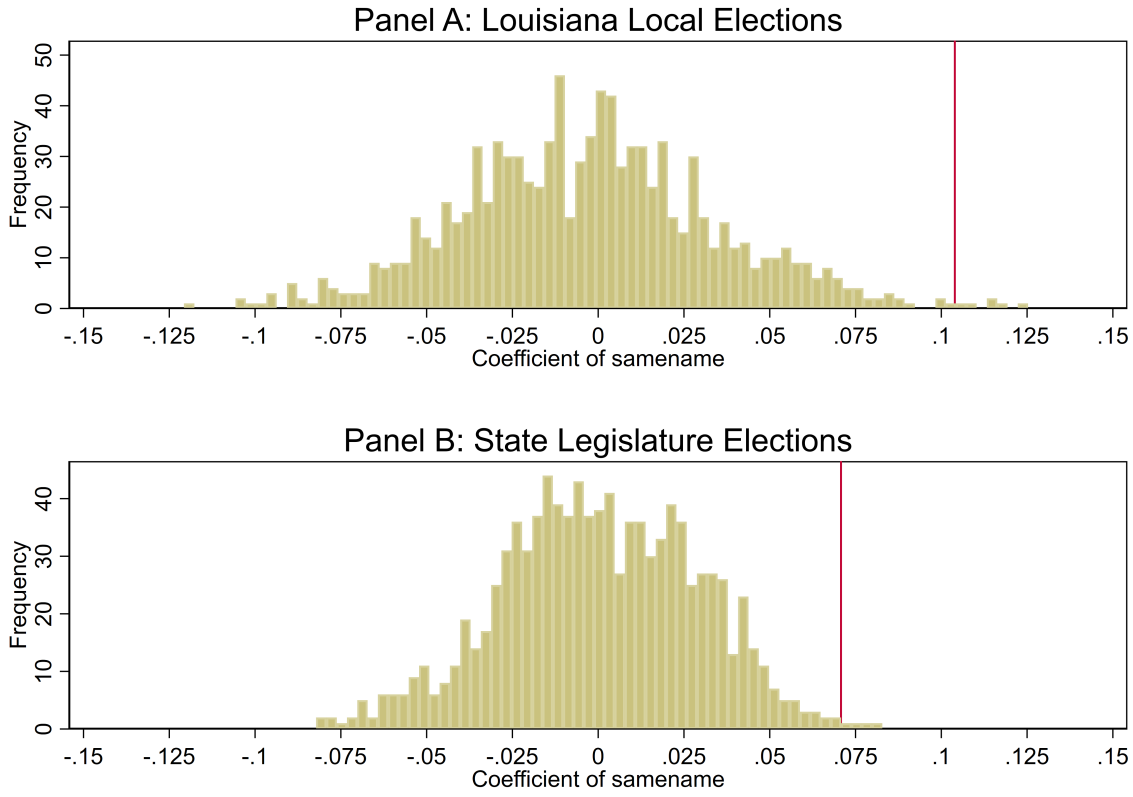

Figure A2: Distribution of estimated coefficients of randomization tests

Notes: The figure displays the distribution of estimated coefficients from 1,000 simulations where same-name status was randomly assigned to candidates. The vertical red line represents the result estimated from the preferred specification, as reported in Table 1. Panel A presents the results for Louisiana local elections, while Panel B shows the results for state legislature elections.

[Back to Page 12]