

Voter optimism wanes in run-up to election day

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This image shows Kate Sweeny, University of California, Riverside. Credit: University of California, Riverside

(Phys.org) —Scholars have long known that voters tend to believe that the candidates they support will win, even when victory seems unlikely. But there has been little research about how voter expectations of election outcomes change in the weeks before Election Day, or how those expectations relate to the level of disappointment experienced

when a favored candidate or ballot measure loses.

A new study by psychologists at the University of California, Riverside and Iowa State University—"Causes and Consequences of Expectation [Trajectories](#): 'High' on Optimism in a Public Ballot Initiative," published this month online in the peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Science*—is the first to measure how voter expectations about favored candidates or ballot measures change over time.

Researchers Kate Sweeny, assistant professor of psychology at UC Riverside, and Zlatan Krizan, assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State University, surveyed 175 California voters during the five weeks before the November 2010 election about the ballot measure that would have legalized marijuana for recreational use. The measure, Proposition 19, failed.

Sweeny and Krizan found that voters who were better informed about waning support for the proposition were likely to lower their expectations regarding the measure's passage as Election Day neared. However, being better informed about issues related to the initiative had less impact on those who favored the measure than among those who opposed it. Additionally, supporters who remained optimistic about the initiative's outcome over time were more likely to vote and were more disappointed after the measure failed than those who became more pessimistic.

"We've known for decades that people tend to brace for the worst by abandoning optimism as the moment of truth draws near, but we didn't know whether this time-based shift in expectations mattered in and of itself," Sweeny explained. "Our findings show that voters who defy that trend and maintain optimism up to Election Day are more motivated to vote but also more disappointed if things don't turn out their way."

The researchers found that both proponents and opponents became less optimistic about the outcome as Election Day neared. People who remained optimistic about the proposition's chances of passage were most likely to turn out and vote in favor, "which speaks to the motivating power of positive expectations and affirms the value of the intense efforts campaigns make to maintain voters' optimism to the end," they determined. "Campaigns typically invest substantial resources in maintaining optimism among supporters to the bitter end, which may explain why electoral expectations do not always shift toward pessimism."

Maintaining optimism comes at a cost, however, the psychologists said: Sustaining optimistic expectations in the face of information suggesting the likelihood of failure can exacerbate disappointment among supporters.

"This disappointment, though short-lived, can be a poignant and memorable experience that is likely to come readily to mind the next time a voter considers investing time and energy in a beloved cause," Sweeny noted. "As they say, once bitten, twice shy."

More information: pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97612460690.full.pdf

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