

MEDIA EFFECTS ON VOTING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This is a review study investigating the effects of the media on voting behavior. We reviewed the cited literature. The present study showed that the role of the media in influencing election results is generally quite small. However, this insignificance is not inherent; it cannot be attributed to out-dated class rationalisation or even to “resurgent” economic factors. Rather, it is the result of other competing factors including: the counteracting factor, which is a reference to the constant battles between rival candidates. Naturally, positive, image-conscious campaigning by candidates is mirrored by all sides; therefore, on a neutral individual no overall influence would be visible. Another factor involves the absence of clear superiority, which refers to the rare occasion in which one candidate (or party) clearly excels in its media campaign, while its opponents do not use the media in an effective manner. This superiority occurs rarely because all politicians employ PR and media consultants.

Keywords: Media Effects, Campaigns, Elections

Introduction

There is an ongoing debate in the literature as to whether or not the media have an effect on viewers' attitudes and voting behavior (Trystan, Scully and Jones, 2003). However, the continued debate on the cash for peerages affair has shown that media campaigns have an important influence on the electorate. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party of Britain were so determined to gain the advantage in their respective election campaigns that they arranged for loans to finance them. This situation indicates the importance attributed to good media campaigns (Jones and George, 2005).

The study of voting behaviour has become increasingly complex in recent years. In the past, only the political manifestos of the parties determined their success in elections. However, success is no longer believed to be determined in this manner. It is rare to find commentators who still

subscribe to entirely social models, which argue that the decisions of individuals are based exclusively on their social groups (McAllister, 1986).

An important question has emerged in this debate: will the media ever influence individuals from working-class backgrounds to the extent of voting for the Conservative Party? (Oakley, 2012). Similarly, could conservative religious individuals from the Southern United States ever be expected to switch their vote to the Democrat party as a result of a strong media campaign? This question also applies equally to other parties, such as socialists, who would not normally vote for centre-right parties (Larry and Terry, 2008).

There are other examples in industrial democracies in which the electorate has an obvious political orientation. If a clear inconsistency between voters and a candidate/party exists in a constituency, then it is possible to predict the results (Caul and Gray, 2000). Knowledge of various regions has led political parties to allocate more importance to campaigning in certain constituencies more than in others. In fact, it is common to observe parties dismissing certain constituencies as impossible to win and assuming that they can safely win others (Freeman, 1986). This essay investigates whether the media do (or can) play a role in deciding the outcome of elections and finds that the effects of the media are minimal.

This essay is divided into four parts; first, the theory on voting behaviour; second, a look at the use of the media; third, a discussion of the role of candidate images in the media; and a final section which weighs the arguments *for* and *against* the view that the media help to determine voter behaviour.

This essay is based on the critical assumption that long-term factors are important in determining political preferences at the ballot box. However, the title does not indicate whether the object of the essay is to assess the effect of the media in the long or short term—that is, whether the focus is long-term media coverage or media campaigns immediately before elections. Undoubtedly, a long-term media campaign in favour of one political party will have a considerably greater effect on attitudes than a campaign which begins two or three months before an election. This essay examines only the effect of media campaigns just before elections, because this issue is more relevant to modern liberal democracies.¹

Voting behaviour in the literature

Classical studies of voting behaviour have identified useful voting patterns which focus directly on individual voters. Authors who pioneered such approaches as sociology and economics to electoral analysis include

¹ Long-term institutional media bias would not be accepted in advanced democracies, and this topic is will not be discussed here.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944). Some of the principles that they established subsequently became the foundation for the work of other authors. Although there are many commonalities between the various traditions, each tradition provides insights to respond to individual challenges (Carmines and Huckfeldt, 1996, p.224).

The economic approach was used by Downs (1957), who analysed political apathy long before it became a serious topic of discussion. He argued that voters would not find it rational to participate in elections on the basis of self-interested motivation alone. Many political economists have supported this idea, but others have asserted that this view contradicts the evidence (Carmines and Huckfeldt, 1996). Accounting for these various approaches is beyond the scope of this essay, but the economic approach is found to be particularly helpful in this context. The “rational” economic factor explains the effect of media campaigns on politically active citizens who do not have strong partisan dispositions—“undecided” voters (Downs, 1957, 3).

Generally, the remainder of the electorate is divided into two groups. In the first group, voters form their preferences on the basis of social or other associations. In the second group, voters simply abstain from basing their decisions on short-term economic self-interest. The undecided voters, who do not have deep convictions, will be open to media pressure with its constant messages of both direct “first-level” opinions and indirect “second-level” hints. The influence of the media will increase as the size of this group increases. First-level agenda setting, first advanced by Lippmann, refers to the way in which we form the “pictures in our heads”. The same thing at a second level is a relatively new idea which seeks to explain not only what we think about but also how we assess these thoughts (McCombs et al. 1997, p.703).

Dalton and Wattenberg (1993) present another concept related to this issue. They assume that voters identify with their choice of party because they perceive that the party’s objectives are compatible with their own. Thus, for a large part of the electorate, the decision-making process becomes quite simple: they support the candidate(s) whose background is most similar to their own.

Early work focusing on social groups was more applicable to Europe than to the United States. However, the basic framework for the various electorate groups in Europe and the US is the same; identification with a candidate/party can arise from social, religious, or regional cleavages. As a result, voting behaviour for this large segment of the population remains constant across elections.

Classical sociological studies explain the political preferences of voters with respect to background. Without this perspective, these studies

lack the ability to explain other profound motivations in detail. This failure to account for voter behaviour has produced other approaches, such as psychological and economic ones. Dalton et al. (1993) notes that social characteristics have limited value in providing a “catalyst” for the analysis of various issues which lack a “class referent”.

Using the media: a skill

Landslide Labour wins in the 1997 and 2001 general elections largely resulted from a well-orchestrated media campaign. Tony Blair, who became the leader of the Labour Party, recognised that Labour had suffered from an image problem and that the media platforms did not represent the Labour Party well. He was determined to change this situation (Osborne 2005 not in References).

Osborne in 2005 discussed how the Labour Party transformed its politics. The party realised that it needed in the best interests of the country to abandon its traditional socialist-leaning policies. The Labour Party accepted that this approach would lead to two problems. It needed to persuade its grassroots members of the importance of such radical changes and simultaneously appeal to a wider and more sceptical audience. These goals could be accomplished by sending two messages through the media. The first message was an appeal to grassroots supporters for reforms which retained the interests of “hardworking families”. The second message that was presented to the wider public was the break with traditional, out-dated policies in the name of *New Labour*.

In the general election of 1997, the Labour Party adopted sophisticated techniques of campaigning and created decisive media presentations consisting of spin doctoring, image enhancement, and rebuttals of the electorate’s fears regarding a Labour win. For example, with regard to the issue of tax increases, a Gallup poll in March 1997 examined voter fears regarding the Labour agenda and showed that taxes had fallen to fourth position in the ranking of concerns. This issue had been in second place only the previous August and had subsequently changed as a result of a deliberate media campaign (Butler and Kavanagh 1997).

The Labour Party managed the media campaign confidently, sending the message to voters that there would be no returning to the traditional left ground of politics and reassuring them that under New Labour, issues such as National Insurance contributions, public sector spending and business relations would not be affected at all (Butler and Kavanagh 1997). Alastair Campbell, the famous spin doctor, arranged for Blair to write in *The Sun* (Butler and Kavanagh 1997). Blair explicitly voiced his doubts over closer integration with the EU and asserted his position on other populist issues, such as the Conservative crime bill (Butler and Kavanagh 1997).

Osborne (2005) documented how skilfully “New Labour, particularly Tony Blair, [had] used the media from the beginning of his succession. Since 1994, Blair [had] used his image as a fresh-faced, untainted politician to good effect. One outstanding example is the abolishment of Clause Four, the commitment to common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Osborne stated that although Blair had made a commitment to abolish this core Labour principle in 1994 in an *innocent-sounding* statement regarding Labour objectives, extraordinarily, he received a standing ovation from an unsuspecting audience. Although Osborne denounced this approach as a lie, other commentators would simply refer to it as focusing on an attractive image.

The use of the media has enormous potential to promote political parties, but this potential is not always easy to bring out. Osborne (2005) praises the three previous Labour leaders for their integrity, emphasising that Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock and John Smith were “genuine decent politicians”. Osborne argued that the decency demonstrated by these politicians was actually what constrained them, since they lost four consecutive elections. Despite their integrity, these leaders were unable to connect with the media.

Six months before the 1997 general election, the sympathetic Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee wrote, “Labour is taking no risks. After four defeats, they have abandoned their view of the voter as a decent sort and adopted the Tory model of the voter as a selfish, lying bastard. Soon after the last [1992] election, I talked to a deeply depressed Labour shadow cabinet member who cursed the voters bitterly and concluded: ‘*the only way we can win is to lie and cheat about taxes the way Tories do*’ so let us hope that this is their secret strategy”. Toynbee warned against potential consequences: “How will we ever persuade people that government is good, healthy and necessary?”² This point is critical for understanding this debate; the use of the media can have enormous implications but often at the expense of integrity.

Candidate images and media effects

Studies of the media indicate the central influence of the media in forming images in the minds of voters. An example of this argument is the well-known thesis *Public Opinion* by Lippmann (1992, p 29), which was the basis for subsequent work. Lippmann focused on “first-level” agenda setting. Other authors, such as McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1997), have highlighted another important aspect of agenda setting, the “second level”. Second-level agenda setting is more relevant for the purposes of the

² Quote cited by Osborne in *The Rise of Political Lying* (2005).

present essay.³ McCombs et al. argue that in addition to the “salience of issues” in the setting of an agenda (at the first level), it is essential to widen the scope of agenda-setting theory to include “the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda of the attributes and frames that describe topics on the agenda”.

The study by McCombs et al. on second-level agenda setting investigates Spanish regional and municipal elections. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of numerous studies in other countries. These authors demonstrate a significant correspondence between “various news and advertising agendas and the pictures of the parliamentary and mayoral candidates in Spanish voters’ minds”. McCombs et al. claim that the media set the agenda of importance for people; moreover, it establishes a framework for voter thinking. Thus, the media have the ability to recognise certain important categories, such as youthfulness, intelligence, openness, and charisma, in particular, and to inform the public of candidates who possess (or lack) these qualities. Therefore, the media’s influence can be profound.

Although this influence over voting behaviour appears to be vast, there are several important checks. Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) provide a breakthrough in terms of the analysis of “media effect” models. These authors demonstrate that receptivity to agenda setting by the electorate is “audience contingent”. It is mistaken to assume that the media are the cause of an audience’s increased concern regarding an issue that has received increased media coverage. The media constitute only one of several determinants of individual priorities with respect to certain issues or events. Erbring et al. present an alternative “audience effects” model which contends that media coverage merely “interacts with the audience’s pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issue concerns”. As such, the media act as a “trigger” to activate dormant salience awareness. This issue is critical; it indicates that the messages received from the media are sent only to already-converted voters and thus are not critical. As Erbring et al. note, “People have different notions of what is important to them, and they tune in and out accordingly”.

Messages from the media undergo a complex filtering because interested citizens are also likely to be affected by their social networks, background information, and psychological condition. The result, as MacKuen et al. (1990)⁴ argue, may be a message that is misperceived such that it agrees with an individual’s thinking. Erbring et al. conclude that

³ First-level agenda setting is a reference to traditional agenda-setting theory, which seeks to establish a link between the salience of issues to voters and their corresponding prominence in the media.

⁴ This article is cited by Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996); see the references section.

exposure to media content is a necessary but insufficient condition for shaping the public's notions of what is important. Other elements can alter the "media effect". These elements include individual mechanisms of selective perception, social processes which filter the receipt of news, and a test of reality in terms of direct experience.⁵

Supporters of the theory that the media have limited access to the decision-making processes of voters cite several reasons in support of this view. Carmines et al. cite four key reasons in this "minimal effects model":

- 1) Citizens are not sufficiently interested to take note of the media.
- 2) Conflicting messages cancel one another out.
- 3) Citizens are selective, and they choose to receive only such information as reinforces their existing preferences.
- 4) The messages which are absorbed are catalysed through individuals' own interactions and communication.

Effect of campaigning: minimal or negative?

At one stage in the history of presidential election monitoring in the US, it became fashionable among many political scientists to argue that campaigns were "electorally inconsequential". Many studies of voting behaviour were conducted. Their conclusions demonstrate that individual political preferences were highly stable during election years and that campaigns had a negligible effect on the outcome of elections.

Finkel in 1993 examined the minimal effects model to determine whether it still applied in the context of the influence of campaigns on individual votes and election outcomes. He found that he agreed with the notion that the mass media may influence voter attitudes during election campaigns. Additionally, he supported the notion that the media play a critical role in "reinforcing pre-existing dispositions" and that the media can bring about changes in presidential approval, as West (1991) observed in relation to Reagan's skill in using television. However, Finkel insisted that the changes produced by the media "served mainly to strengthen the probability that the individual will vote in accordance with his or her initial political dispositions". The other crucial influence of the media is felt by voters whose "dispositions and stated preferences are incongruent at the outset of the campaign, thus drawing individuals back to their predisposed candidate".

Finkel (1993) shows that the major contributors to the predictive power of any model are a combination of other variables, including race, pre-campaign party identification, evaluations of the incumbent's performance,

⁵ These elements have been identified by various authors, including Erring, Miller, Goldenberg, and Mackie, but a list has been compiled by the present author of the current study.

and personal integrity. However, the campaign itself is not among these variables.

At this point, it is important to distinguish between the concept of political campaigning and that of a media campaign. An analysis of the concept of political campaigning falls outside the scope of this essay. Thus, the findings from Finkel and other researchers are only as relevant as the proportion of a campaign that is addressed by the media.

As an alternative to the minimal effects model, Finkel presents an “activation model”, which implies that campaigns activate an already sympathetic electorate without changing political attitudes towards any one candidate on aggregate. Changes during the presidential campaigns have generated a maximum of 3% net gain, as occurred in the 1984 elections favouring Reagan.

By contrast, campaigning may have an adverse effect on levels of participation in elections. In their experiments with the 1992 Senate elections, Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino (1994) found that exposure to negative advertisements reduced the intention to vote by 4%. Other researchers, such as Kahn and Kenney (1999), have since replicated these findings.

It is possible to argue that although campaigns which ultimately discourage people from casting their vote affect turnout, they do not affect the political preferences of the electorate. Supporters of this opinion argue that abstention may have an equal effect on all the competing parties. Thus, there is no overall influence on voting behaviour in general; however, this statement may be less true if clear signals show that abstention favours one party/candidate over another. In such a case, suppressing turnout by means of negative campaigning may favour a specific party/candidate (Shinto and Markus, 1999).

Undoubtedly, the role of the media in setting the scene for voters is crucial. However, without the above qualifications, negative personal smearing cannot significantly influence the end result. Kahn and Kenney (1999) find that “responses to the negativity of campaigns depend on political predispositions”. These authors suggest that unjustified and unsubstantiated attacks had a more marked “turn-off” effect on independents, people with less interest in politics, and people with less knowledge about politics. The effect of “attack” campaigning is that “*both* surges and declines” in turnout can be achieved by high-intensity campaigns (Ansolabehere et al. 1994).

This essay argues that the segment of society that is most “moved” by negative campaigning is important in this debate. Campaign advertising, as Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) found, has especially high information

value for this “captive audience” because they are apolitical and insufficiently motivated to find other means of forming their own views.

Party loyalty remains one of the strongest predictors of voting behaviour. Nevertheless, there has been an increasing trend for individuals to dissociate themselves from parties altogether. Inglehart and Hochstein (1972) term this dissociation “de-alignment”.⁶ The emergence of new “populist” issues contributes to the de-alignment of followers. These issues typically lack traditional party policy or must be sidestepped to gain popular approval. One example of this is the environment; the Labour party and, more recently, the Conservatives have embraced this issue. The environment is an issue which is traditionally associated with the left, specifically, the Greens, but the issue is now so fashionable that most politicians are happy to address it.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that the part played by the media in influencing election results is generally quite small. However, this insignificance is not inherent; it cannot be attributed to outdated class rationalisation or even to “resurgent” economic factors. Rather, it is the result of other competing factors. The first among these factors is the counteracting factor, which is a reference to the constant battles between rival candidates. Naturally, positive, image-conscious campaigning by candidates is mirrored by all sides; therefore, no overall influence either way would be perceptible on a neutral individual.

The second factor is the absence of clear superiority, which brings up the rare occasions when one candidate (or party) clearly excels in its media campaign, while its opponents do not use the media effectively. This superiority occurs rarely because all politicians employ several PR and media consultants. However, it was observed in the 1997 general elections in the UK and was featured in the public image of Tony Blair, who gained a remarkable victory.

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⁶ As cited by Dalton and Wattenberg (1993).

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