

2012

Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and First-time College Student Voters

Louisa Ha
Bowling Green State University, louisah@bgsu.edu

Fang Wang
Bowling Green State University

Ling Fang
Bowling Green State University

Chen Yang
Bowling Green State University

Xiao Hu
Bowling Green State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/smc_pub

 *next page for additional authors*
Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ha, Louisa; Wang, Fang; Fang, Ling; Yang, Chen; Hu, Xiao; Yang, Liu; Yang, Fang; and Xu, Ying, "Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and First-time College Student Voters" (2012). *School of Media and Communication Faculty Publications*. 4.
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/smc_pub/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Media and Communication at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Media and Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Author(s)

Louisa Ha, Fang Wang, Ling Fang, Chen Yang, Xiao Hu, Liu Yang, Fang Yang, and Ying Xu

**Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media
among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and
First-time College Student Voters**

By

Louisa Ha, Ph.D.

Professor and Chair,

Department of Telecommunications

Bowling Green State University

louisah@bgsu.edu

and

Fang Wang, Ling Fang, Chen Yang, Xiao Hu, Liu Yang, Fang Yang, Ying Xu

Ph.D. students

School of Media & Communication

Bowling Green State University

and Dave Morin, Ph.D.

Bowling Green State University

- **Citation:**
- **Ha, Louisa,** Fang Wang, Ling Fang, Chen Yang, Xiao Hu, Liu Yang, Fan Yang, Ying Xu, Dave Morin (2013). "Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and First-time College Student Voters." *Electronic News, Special Issue on 2012 Election*.7(4), 204-222. DOI: 10.1177/1931243113515678.

**Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media
among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and
First-time College Student Voters**

News media play a crucial role in democracy by serving as the watchdog of government and a distributor of political information and campaign messages to the general public. In the U.S., commercial media dominate the market, and they receive monetary support during the electoral campaign season via political advertising. In the 2012 presidential campaign, U.S. television media received 75% of the \$1.1 billion dedicated to campaign advertising (Wilner, 2012). So much money is spent because the votes of undecided citizens in swing states are crucial to winning presidential elections. Most recently, the Democratic Party successfully targeted and won key swing states during the 2012 campaign, and helped Barack Obama secure a second term as president (The United States Study Center, 2012).

This study examined the role of national and local news media in political decision-making and participation among undecided voters. More specifically, the relationship between political efficacy and geographic scope of media use was analyzed, as political efficacy is an important variable that contributes to political participation (Jung, 2011). In light of the increasing popularity of social and online media to share and disseminate political information, this study also examined the use of online media, and more precisely how social media are used to acquire political information.

In addition to examining the relationship between voting behavior and political efficacy, we introduced the concept of partially undecided voters to better understand how national and local election efficacy differs among both partially and total undecided voters. This study attempts to provide a clearer picture of the relationship between news media use and political efficacy for undecided voters with different levels of voting decisiveness and experience.

Literature Review

Political Efficacy and Political Participation

Political efficacy is one of the most theoretically important and frequently used concepts to explain and predict political attitudes and behaviors among citizens (Morrell, 2003; Niemi, Craig & Mattei, 1991). Defined broadly, political efficacy is the underlying belief of an individual's powerfulness or powerlessness in the political world (Morrell, 2003). Political science researchers generally agree that political efficacy should be differentiated into *external political efficacy* and *internal political efficacy*. According to "participatory democracy" theorists like Pateman (1970), Thompson (1970), and Craig and Maggionto (1982), internal political efficacy refers to an individual's feeling of being capable of influencing government and politics. In contrast, "mobilization of support" theorists conceptualize political efficacy in terms of how much an individual believes government is responsive to citizen influence, which is often categorized as external political efficacy (Craig, 1979).

The relationship between political participation and individual political attitudes has been studied extensively. As suggested by Pateman (1970), Thompson (1970), and Mason (1982), there is a positive relationship between political participation, and moral and political development. Although there is a substantial amount of past scholarship focusing on the factors that influence an individual's political involvement, scant attention has been paid to the recursive effect of political participation. Among the few studies that have examined this recursive effect, some have found no definitive conclusions related to the effect (cf. Elden, 1981), while others have found effects opposite of hypothetical expectations (Greenberg, 1981; Kelso, 1978). Finkel (1981) investigated the influence of both electoral and campaign participation on citizens' internal and external efficacy by analyzing a 1970s three-wave election panel collected by the Survey Research Center. In the models linking voting with internal political efficacy, the voting-to-efficacy effect was statistically significant, and also larger in magnitude than the insignificant efficacy-to-voting effect. Further, the external efficacy models displayed reciprocal effects

between voting and efficacy, which were not only statistically significant, but also twice as large in magnitude as the effects of voting on internal efficacy.

News Media's Role in Politics: Media Mobilization vs. Media Malaise

To better explain the relationship between media use and political participation, scholars have put forward a number of theories, including the media mobilization and media malaise theory. According to the media mobilization theory, news media act as agents to mobilize the public to participate in politics. In contrast, the media malaise theory asserts that entertainment media and/or certain news media (e.g., television news) decrease the public's interest and increase its cynicism in politics. In terms of the media mobilization theory, past research has established a strong and positive correlation between consuming news about public affairs and the political socialization process. For example, obtaining news from a newspaper is one of the strongest predictors of political participation (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2003). Similarly, Garramone and Atkin (1986) explored the association between exposure to media and fundamental political knowledge in young people. Based on a survey of public school students, they found that newspaper reading had the greatest impact on political participation, and broadcast media helped students gain an understanding of current events.

Choi and Becker (1987) found a difference between the use of newspaper and television news on confidence in voting decisions. Newspaper reading increased voters' ability to discriminate between the issue positions and images of candidates in a gubernatorial election, and subsequently increased confidence in voting decisions. Television news viewing, however, did not have an effect on voter confidence. Likewise, using data from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey, Kenski and Stroud (2006) showed that several of the relationships between Internet access, political efficacy, knowledge, and political participation are detectable even when taking into account socio-demographic variables, party identification, partisan strength, political interest, and other media exposures covariates (e.g., cable news, local news, and new media exposure) into account. Austin and Halvorson (2008) investigated the knowledge, attitudes, and motivations of politically active college students. Media

usage, including exposure to television, radio, newspaper, and the Internet, were combined to create a general media usage index, which showed that overall media use was significant in relation to political activity. Based on these findings, they suggested that blogging encourages people to engage in political participation. Aquino, Joksch, Turco and Reinecker (2009) studied the extent to which television and the Internet influences individuals' intent to vote. Watson (2008) found that the Internet is not yet the main source for acquiring political information for the majority of citizens. Nonetheless, the study did find that Internet usage and television news consumption both predicted individuals' intent to vote. Winneg's (2011) study showed that while the Internet did mobilize people to participate in pre-election campaign activities, those engaged in more traditional offline participation activities were more likely to vote.

Bakker and De Vreese (2011) argued that specific media usage is a stronger predictor of political participation than time spent with a medium. They proposed that there are four types of political participation: digital passive participation; digital active participation; traditional passive participation and traditional active participation. Their study found that using the Internet to gather news is a positive predictor for all four forms of political participations. Internet use is a stronger predictor for newer forms of political participation such as participating in online polls when compared to traditional forms of political participation such as participation in public debate forums

Unlike the media mobilization theory, the media malaise theory posits that media use negatively influences the public's political participation (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Stromback and Schehata, 2010). For example, Lee (2005) found talk radio, television, and the Internet all appeared to have negative effects on political engagement. Moreover, Internet use and television viewing were both associated with increased political cynicism. Lee (2006) explored the effects of Internet use on college students' internal and external political efficacy. The findings indicated that news site usage and interactive contact with public sector agencies increased internal political efficacy, but students who visited government websites had decreased levels of external political efficacy. Accordingly, young voters' use

of the Internet allowed them to be more informed about politics, but it did not make them feel like the government would be effective, thereby decreasing their likelihood to participate in the political process.

News Media Use and Political Efficacy

Researchers have found that different media have varying influence on the political efficacy of voters. Edwards (2009) argues that media's own representation of political candidate character attributes, competency, and viability can shape public perception in ways that overwhelm a candidate's own preferred self-presentation. Gronbeck (2009) suggests that candidates could use various online media such as Myspace, Youtube, and Facebook to reach voters. Unlike television, the Internet allows users to glean a more personal perspective of a political candidate. Tewksbury, Hals, and Bibart (2008) examined the association between basic news consumption style, information browsing, and political efficacy. They found that newspaper browsers appear to be interested in a wide variety of topics, both political and non-political, and thus these individuals believe they have a better understanding of society as a whole. As a result, newspaper browsers are more politically efficacious than those who rely on television and the Internet to obtain information. Zhou (2012) conducted an online survey to investigate the effects of political involvement, information source attention, and online political discussion on young adult's political efficacy. It was shown that involvement in public affairs is positively associated with online political expression and external political efficacy.

Recent research indicates that using social media and public affairs websites positively predicts political efficacy (Zhou & Pinkleton, 2012). Kushin and Yamamoto's (2010) study of college student activity during the 2008 United States presidential election concluded that female respondents were more politically efficacious when compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, using the radio to gather news was a significant predictor, with respondents who actively listened to radio news programs as being more politically efficacious. Engaging in social media was not significantly related to political self-efficacy or involvement. Online expression was significantly related to situational political involvement but not political self-efficacy. Furthermore, age was positively associated with situational political

involvement, with older respondents being more involved in the election than their younger counterparts. Newspaper use was a significant predictor of situational political involvement, with those reading the newspapers for campaign information being more involved in the election. In contrast, reading magazines was negatively associated with situational political involvement. In a similar study, De Zúñiga (2012) found that the use of social network sites for acquiring news was positively related to civic participation. As for offline political participation, age, education, political efficacy, media use, and the characteristics of discussion networks were found to be significant predictors for offline political participation.

In terms of emerging media, recent studies have shown that mobile phones are fast becoming the primary tool for communicating with close social ties (Campbell & Russo, 2003; Habuchi, Okabe & Matsuda, 2005; Ling, 2004, 2008). Campbell and Kwak (2011) used a national mail survey to find distinctions between mobility and portability in the flow of network communication. Additionally, their analysis found that mobile-based political discussions have a positive association with participation, though the relationship is moderate in magnitude.

According to Han (2008), actively seeking online political information raises people's likelihood of voting. However, other studies are mixed in respect to the relationship between media use patterns and political efficacy. Although Pinkleton and Austin (2001) suggest that people who seek out political news content have a higher political efficacy than those who do not, Jung (2011) used an O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects to examine the role of political efficacy as a mediator between communication and online/offline political participation. Jung's (2011) study not only supported political efficacy's role as a mediator, but also indicated that Internet use is a significant factor in promoting political participation. Online social network usage helped to explain the probability of voting by 5.8% (Kim & Geidner, 2008). According to McGrath (2011), the advent of online news media and Internet communication has contributed to the largest voting turnout since 1960, and the second largest turnout of youth voters in American history.

Undecided Voters and Their Roles in the Election

Although undecided voters have always been targeted by politicians, and they are studied extensively by political science researchers (Arcuri et al., 2008), there is a lack of differentiation between the partially undecided voter and the totally undecided voter. Few studies have explored the nuances of what constitutes an undecided voter, and their subsequent relationship with media. In a study undertaken by Arcuri and his colleagues (2008), it was found that undecided voters have some preliminary attitudes (both positive and negative) towards candidates. A survey done in 2003 showed that undecided voters are particularly drawn to cartoons, talk shows and certain television programs, and they are also less likely to watch dramas and news (Melillo, 2004). Smerecnik and Dionisopoulos (2009) assert that “one of the most difficult but important tasks performed by a presidential candidate is the ability to communicate messages that affirm the beliefs of a core constituency while simultaneously appealing to undecided voters” (p.148). Through the examination of then-presidential candidate John McCain’s website in 2008, they found his campaign successfully affirmed the values of his committed conservative base as well as attempted to address issues that were important to uncommitted moderates. Since 1992, undecided voters have been invited to contribute to presidential debates by asking a wide range of questions (Eveland Jr., McLeod & Nathanson, 1994). Kitchens and Powell (2003) conducted a study examining media’s influence on undecided voters. Although the results indicated that information seeking activities of undecided voters had an impact on their political knowledge, this did not lead to increased willingness to express an opinion on current issues nor did it lead to more of a likelihood of making a voting decision. Because of scant research, very little is known regarding media’s influence on voters who are partially or totally undecided.

Research on First-Time Voters

In an attempt to understand first-time voters, Quarles (1979) compared experienced and first time voters’ susceptibility to campaign messages. She found that first-time voters were more likely than experienced voters to respond to campaign stimuli to learn about candidates and issues through the

newspaper. Similarly, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) found that first-time voters were more susceptible to a television panel debate as they were less politically active and had less political experience and knowledge compared to experienced voters. Despite the incorporation of social media by political campaigns, traditional media sources still play a more significant role in developing first-time voters' political ideology (Coufal & Roberts, 2009). Furthermore, young first-time voters are less tied to a political party (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964), and are more likely to wait until the last minute to vote than experienced voters (CIRCLE staff, 2008; Fournier et al., 2004). Some have argued that the low voter turnout rate among college students and young people in general can be attributed to the transition to adulthood and the fluctuation of maturity. However, Highton & Wolfinger (2001) refute such an argument by empirically showing that the transition to adulthood did not enhance voter turnout. Instead, low turnout among young voters may be due to the lack of political efficacy. Dermondy, Hanmer-Lloyd, and Scullion's (2010) study supports this assertion. By examining first-time voters in the 2005 British general election, the researchers found that trust and cynicism were negatively related to political engagement and contributed to non-voting.

Research Questions

Because there was no prior study specifically comparing the partially undecided voters and totally undecided voters, our first research question examines the characteristics of each type of undecided voters, their media use patterns and political ideology.

RQ1. Who are the totally undecided and partially undecided voters among first-time and general population voters? What are their demographic characteristics and their local, national, social, and online news media use patterns? What is their political ideology?

Past research has explored political efficacy and media use, but these studies tend not to differentiate between local and national news media. Because local news media cover not only local election news but also national election news from a local perspective, and the national news media rarely covers local election news, we examine if there were any difference in the relationship between local and

national news media use in association with political efficacy. Based on the media mobilization theory, news media use should contribute to higher political efficacy and especially election efficacy, but based on media malaise theory, news media use may negatively affect political efficacy. The effect of news media use may differ between general population voters and college student voters because of the difference in political experience and knowledge.

RQ2a. Is there a positive relationship between political efficacy and local and national news media use among general population voters?

RQ2b. Is there a positive relationship between political efficacy and local and national news media use among first-time college student voters?

As undecided voters are often the target of political advertising, it is necessary to identify which medium is used by totally and partially undecided voters to acquire relevant political information. Prior research indicates that young people vary in their media use from the general population (e.g., Bakker and DeVreese, 2011). As such; first-time and general population voters may differ in where and in what medium they receive their campaign information.

RQ3a. Which medium is the most important source of campaign information for totally and partially undecided voters among general population voters?

RQ3b. Which medium is the most important source of campaign information for totally and partially undecided voters among college student voters?

Method

The data for this study was acquired via a mail survey of general residents and self-administered Web survey of college students of a local mid-sized market in a swing state from September 6th to 30th, 2012 -- prior to the Presidential Debates. Respondents were able to choose to respond to the web version of the survey rather than through mail. A mail and web survey was used instead of a telephone survey

because self-paced surveys, when administered via the web or through the mail, can avoid the time pressure and acquiescence bias inherent in telephone survey designs (Shrum, 2002). In addition, mail and web surveys facilitate honest answers as shown in previous studies comparing the results of different modes of survey (e.g., Kreuter, Presser & Tourangeau, 2008). All respondents resided in Ohio, a presidential swing state that does not vote for one particular party on a consistent basis. A local market was targeted instead of a statewide population, because respondents could directly report their media use towards both local and national news outlets with the same slate of election candidates. Moreover, the goal of the study was not to represent the state population, but instead to compare general voters and first-time voters, and between partially and totally undecided voters.

There were two sampling frames this study used to cover both the general population and college population. For the general population, a simple random sample selected from a Northwest Ohio resident database supplied by a local newspaper (n=1500), were sent the questionnaire package with a cover letter, a visually attractive questionnaire booklet, and a stamped reply envelope with a fresh one dollar bill as an incentive for participation. The procedure followed the Tailored Design Method of Dillman (2007) which has shown to increase response rates. A postcard reminder was sent one week from initial contact. Individuals with e-mail addresses (n=250) were contacted by e-mail to remind them to return the questionnaires. For the college student sample, 36 small general education classes and two large introductory lecture courses, with a variety of majors and class standings from a Northwest Ohio public university, were used to recruit respondents. Students received extra credit for participating in the study. College students were required to respond to the web version of the survey. A total of 646 responses were received, of which 252 were from residents and 394 were from college students. The response rate of residents excluding the 299 undeliverable questionnaires was 21.1%.

The questionnaire consisted of items measuring respondents' various news media use, political efficacy, online and offline political participation, sources of information related to the 2012 election, and their potential voting decisions, political ideology and demographic information. The authors inquired

about the amount of time respondents spent on each news medium in hours per week as well.

Measures

Totally undecided voters: Those who planned to vote but had not yet decided on whom they were going to vote for at the presidential, state, and local level.

Partially undecided voters: Those who planned to vote and had decided to vote for some of the candidates at either the national, state, or local level.

Political efficacy. Political efficacy was measured in both general attitudinal term as in internal political efficacy, and also in specific term related to the 2012 election. For the general political efficacy measure, we decided to use the Niemi, Craig & Mattei's (1991) four-item internal political efficacy measure in a 5-point Likert scale, which has been shown to be highly reliable and a valid measurement in national political surveys and distinguished from other constructs such as political trust and least affected by question order compared to other political efficacy scales. The four items were 1) "I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics," 2) "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," 3) "I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people," and 4) "I think I am better informed about politics and government than most people." To measure election-specific political efficacy, we divided the items into three levels: national, state and local. For national election efficacy, we asked whether respondents felt their vote would change the outcome of the national election. For state election efficacy, we asked respondents whether they felt their vote would change the outcome of the state election. For local election efficacy, we asked respondents whether they felt their vote would change the outcome of the local election.

Local news media use: Respondents were asked to report their use of local television news, local daily newspapers in print or in an online format, suburban newspapers and free tabloids, ethnic newspapers, and radio news in hours per week.

National news media use: Respondents were asked to report their use of national broadcast television network news, cable television network news, news magazines, social network sites, non-newspaper web sites, blogs, and online video and audio news in hours per week.

Political ideology was measured with a 5-point scale from very conservative, quite conservative, neither conservative nor liberal, quite liberal to very liberal.

Online social media as a source of election information was based on how many posts respondents reported receiving from their friends on SNS related to the 2012 election. These responses were broken down into five intervals, from none to more than 50 posts.

Political online media use was based on the March 2011 Pew Internet & American Life survey, with a multiple response set of 10 items, such as “tell others your candidate’s preference or opinion about the election” or “use the Internet to research or ‘fact check’ claims made during the campaign.”

Findings

Profile of Decided, Partially Undecided and Totally Undecided Voters

Overall, the proportion of undecided and partially undecided voters was slightly higher among college students (n=274) than general population voters (n=217) excluding missing data: 19.8% of the general population respondents could be classified as totally undecided voters and 66.3% partially undecided voters; while 22.6 % of the college student respondents could be classified as total undecided voters, and 69.7% partially undecided voters. But at the local and state level, there were more undecided voters among first-time college student voters than general population voters. At the state election level, only 29% of college students had partially decided on some state election candidates. A full 58% of students were totally undecided on state election candidates. At the local election level, 67% of the student voters were totally undecided on their choice of candidate to support and 25.1% were partially decided on local candidates. The general population had a much lower level of undecided voters. A total of 42.7% of the residents were partially undecided and 38.8% were totally undecided on whom to support at the state level, while 38% claimed to be partially undecided and 47% to be totally undecided in terms

of the local election candidates. At the presidential level, the percentage of undecided voters among first-time voters and general voters was the same. Only 30% of both the general population and students were undecided on whom to support for president. In sum, there were more partially undecided voters than totally undecided voters and decided voters at the state and local elections. The lower the level the election, the more is the proportion of undecided voters.

Among the general population, respondents with lower education ($\chi^2=14.24$, $df=4$, $p < 0.01$) and lower income ($\chi^2=13.22$, $df=4$, $p=0.01$) were more likely to be undecided voters. There was not a significant difference along gender, however. Among college students, women (70.5%) were significantly more likely to be totally undecided voters than men ($\chi^2=4.38$, $df=1$, $p < 0.05$). Similar to the general population, students with lower household income were more likely to be undecided voters ($\chi^2=8.90$, $df=4$, $p=0.06$). In terms of political ideology, totally undecided general population voters were overwhelmingly neutral (71%) in their political ideology, being neither conservative nor liberal, and none were liberal in their political ideology. Only 20.8% of partially undecided resident voters reported their political ideology as liberal. College students also exhibited similar patterns. Most of the totally undecided student voters (69.7%) were neither conservative nor liberal. Very few undecided student voters (9.7%) reported their political ideology as liberal.

News Media Use of Undecided First-time College Student Voters and General Population Voters

Among college students, totally undecided voters used more local news media ($M=3.12$ hours/week, $SD=1.61$) than partially undecided voters ($M=2.74$ hours/week, $SD=3.15$). Partially undecided voters used more national news media ($M=15.9$ hours/week, $SD=18.2$) than totally undecided voters ($M=13.2$ hours/week, $SD=13.6$). These differences were not statistically significant, however.

General population undecided voters had different patterns of news media use when compared to the college students. College students used more national news media (especially in the online and social network site format) than the general population, but the reverse was true for local news media. Partially undecided voters used more news media in both national news and local news media ($M_{\text{national}}=8.60$

hours/week, $SD=7.72$; $M_{\text{local}}=6.93$ hours/week, $SD=5.85$) than totally undecided voters ($M_{\text{national}}=7.44$ hours/week, $SD=7.22$; $M_{\text{local}}=5.80$ hours/week, $SD=5.59$). The differences between totally undecided and partially undecided voters in news media use were not statistically significant.

Difference in Political Efficacy among Local and National News Media Use

Overall internal political efficacy was rather low among general population and college students. Nonetheless, the general population still scored higher in internal political efficacy than students (12.1 vs. 9.7 out of a total of 20). Internal political efficacy was positively correlated with both the efficacy at the national election level ($r=.27$, $p < 0.01$) and local election level ($r=.26$, $p < 0.01$). Totally undecided voters had significantly lower internal political efficacy scores than their partially undecided counterparts, among both the general population and first-time college student voters. Among the general population totally undecided voters, their average internal political efficacy score was 10.4 out of 20, but the partially undecided voters' average political efficacy score was 12.5 ($t = 2.94$, $df=177$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, among first-time college student totally undecided voters, their mean internal political efficacy score was rather low at 8.37, while the partially undecided voters' mean internal political efficacy score was 10.4 ($t=3.46$, $df=244$, $p < 0.01$).

General population respondents had higher election-specific political efficacy than internal political efficacy. A majority of the partially undecided voters believed their vote would affect the outcome of the election. There was a slightly higher local election political efficacy score (65.3%) when compared to the national election political efficacy score (61.7%). Totally undecided voters did not have such high level of election political efficacy, however. Only 40.5% of them believed their vote could change the outcome of the national election, and 39.5% of them believed their vote could change the outcome of the local election. Similarly, partially undecided college student voters had a higher local election efficacy (58.5%) score when compared to their national election efficacy score (54.7%), and only 33.9 % of totally undecided college student voters felt their vote would change the outcome of the national election.

Local news media use ($r = .34, p < 0.01$) was more significantly correlated with general internal political efficacy than national news media use ($r = .17, p < 0.01$) among residents. The correlation was weaker for local news media use among students ($r = .16, p < 0.05$), and even weaker in respect to national news media use ($r = .13, p < 0.05$).

Online and Social Political Media Use

In this study, 56.6% of residents and 59.6% of college students did not participate in politics in any one of the 10 online politically related activities. The most common online activity was searching for information on candidates' voting records or political positions, yet only 20% of the college student respondents and 27% of general population reported doing this.

We also measured the role social media played in the election by measuring the amount of election-related posts the respondent received. About 31% of general population social media users received 11 or more posts related to the 2012 election. Student social media users received more election related posts. A total of 60% of college student respondents received 11 or more posts related to the 2012 election from friends. Despite the considerable amount of politically related messages received, college student's sense of political efficacy was still relatively low, and their online political media use was even lower (though not statistically significant) than the general population.

We ran a multiple regression analysis to predict political efficacy, using media use, political online media use, amount of social media campaign messages received, voter decisiveness (from a 3-point scale from totally undecided, partially undecided, to decided on candidates) and demographic characteristics, among the general population and college student undecided voters. Our results (Table 1) show that although neither local nor national news media use can predict political efficacy, how much people use online media for political activities ($\beta_{\text{general}} = 0.31, p < 0.05$) and the amount of social media political campaign messages received ($\beta_{\text{student}} = 0.13, p < 0.05$) are significant predictors of political efficacy in college students. For the general population, the amount of social media political campaign messages received did not predict political efficacy. Demographic characteristics, such as age (college

students), gender and education (general population only), also contributed to the model fit along political efficacy. Among the general population, males and those with a higher level of education were more likely to be politically efficacious. Voter decisiveness was also a significant predictor of political efficacy. Decided voters were much more likely to be political efficacious than undecided voters. The model predicted internal political efficacy rather well as 33% and 21% of the variance of political efficacy among residents and students, respectively, was explained.

Table 1

Most Important Medium for Totally and Partially Undecided Voters

To the general population voters, television was the most important source of campaign information for both totally (53.8%) and partially undecided (58.1%) voters. The Internet was a distant second for totally undecided voters (18.2%) and partially undecided voters (14%). Newspapers were only mentioned by 11% of undecided voters as where they received the most news about the campaign and election. For first-time college student voters, the Internet was the most commonly reported source for campaign information and election news among totally undecided voters (44.3%) and partially undecided voters (49.2%) as well. Television was the second most important medium for both totally undecided (36.1%) and partially undecided voters (39.8%). Very few (2-3%) college students mentioned newspapers as their most important new source.

As in previous studies on news media use and political participation, we also found different correlations between internal political efficacy along news outlets. For the general population, use of five news media had significant correlations with internal political efficacy: cable TV network news ($r=0.33, p < 0.01$), online newspapers ($r=0.21, p < 0.01$), news magazines ($r= 0.19, p < 0.01$), radio news ($r=0.21, p < 0.01$) and blogs ($r=0.14, p < 0.01$). Among college students, only use of three news media, cable TV network news ($r=0.15, p < 0.01$), daily print newspapers ($r=.12, p < 0.05$) and online newspapers ($r = 0.16, p < 0.01$), had significant positive correlations with internal political efficacy.

Discussion

The general population and first-time college student voters displayed a moderate level of political election efficacy during the 2012 election. A majority of the respondents (more than 50%) believed their vote could change the outcome of the election, despite their low level of internal political efficacy. The large gap between internal political efficacy and election efficacy indicates that environmental factors, such as being in a swing state and news media's emphasis of the importance of swing states, may have affected people's perception of their ability to influence the outcome of an election. With that said, we also found higher local election efficacy than national election efficacy, which indicates voters felt more in control at the local level.

We noticed some differences in news media use between partially undecided voters and totally undecided voters. Partially undecided voters were, in general, heavier users of news media than totally undecided voters. The much higher rate of consumption of national media by first-time voters can be primarily attributed to their heavy use of the Internet and social media. Partially undecided voters had higher internal political efficacy and news media use than totally undecided voters, hence they may be more likely to be mobilized (influenced) by news media than their totally undecided counterparts. The results of this study indicate that campaign advertisements may be more effective for partially undecided voters than totally undecided voters.

One interesting finding was the lack of liberals among totally undecided voters. From this, we may assume that liberals may commit to their candidate choice early in the campaign cycle. Conservatives, or individuals with no clear political identification, may be the citizens that political campaigners should target, especially during the later stage of political campaigns.

In addition, first time college student voters showed much higher uncertainty in candidates' choice and lower political efficacy than general population voters, echoing the results of previous studies comparing experienced and first-time voters (e.g., Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007). Respondents had different media use patterns: The Internet was more important for college students, while television was more important to the general population. Almost none of the college students reported newspapers as sources

of information. Past political communication studies have shown the positive contribution of newspapers on political knowledge and engagement (Choi & Becker, 1987). The declining role of newspapers and the rise of online and social media in relation to political efficacy indicates that politically efficacious people were using online and social media to participate in politics, while the less politically efficacious did not use online media to participate in the political process. College students were more susceptible to online peer influence as reflected in the significant relationship between the amount of social media posts related to election campaigns and political efficacy. This may indicate a self-selection polarized trend with those who are engaged in politics using more media for political purposes, and new media technologies provide more opportunities. Social media's role is still limited in the general population, but we also note that the amount of "friends" postings about the election predicts political efficacy among the college students. Most college students were still rather low in political efficacy and did not commit to any local election candidates. So rather than mobilizing the less active people to become involved in politics, news media may act as a public space to create a common political agenda for the citizens that actively care about the political process (Katz, 1996; Nir, 2012). The politically disengaged remains disengaged, while the engaged utilizes more online and social media to participate in politics.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The higher education bias in mail survey respondents in general population and non-random sample in college students make the results not fully generalizable to lower education groups and all college students. The choice of one local market in one swing state also limits the generalizability of the study. In future research, a comparison with a non-swing state sample may reveal if the results of this study can be applied to other non-swing state populations and to examine the "swing state" effect. More research is needed to further explore the reasons why liberals commit to their candidate choice earlier in the campaign cycle than non-liberals. The "social media postings received" questionnaire item could be --- pointed to specific social networking sites, including Twitter and LinkedIn. Finally, incorporating a more refined political ideology scale with multiple items and

using adjectives such as “somewhat” liberal rather than “quite” liberal may help researchers explore the nuances of political ideology as it relates to political efficacy and media use.

References

- Aalberg, T., & Jenssen, A. (2007). Do television debates in multiparty systems affect viewers? A Quasi-experimental study with first-time Voters. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30(1), 115-135.
- Arcuri, L. Castelli, L. Galdi, S., Zogmaister, C. & Amadori, A. (2008). Predicting the vote: Implicit attitudes as predictors of the future behavior of decided and undecided Voters. *Political Psychology*, 29(3), 369-387. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00635.x
- Aquino, S., Joksch, G., Turco, M., & Reinecker, A. (2009). Effects of the media on intent to vote. Paper presented at International Communication Association 2009 Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois.
- Austin, L., & Halvorson, E. (2008). What drives political activity in college students? An application of the situational theory of publics. Paper presented at International Communication Association 2008 Annual Convention, Quebec, Canada.
- Bakker, T. P., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, Internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research*, 38 (4), 451-470.
- Campbell, S.W. & Russo, T.C. (2003). The social construction of mobile telephony: An application of the social influence model to perceptions and uses of mobile phones within personal communication networks. *Communication Monographs*, 70(4), 317-34.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P.E., Miller, W.E., & Stokes, D. E. (1964). *The American voter*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Choi, H. C. & Becker, S. L. (1987). Media use, issue/image discriminations, and voting. *Communication Research*, 14 (3), 267-290. doi: 10.1177/009365087014003001
- CIRCLE staff. (2008). Young voter in the 2008 presidential election. *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement*. Retrieved on Dec 28, 2012 from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_08_exit_polls.pdf.

- Clarke, H. D., & Acock, A. C. (1989). National elections and political attitudes: The case of political efficacy. *British Journal of Political Science*, 19 (4), 551-562.
- Craig, S. C. (1979). Efficacy, trust, and political behavior. *American Politics Quarterly*, 7 (2), 225-239.
- Craig, S. C., & Maggiotto, M. A. (1982). Measuring political efficacy. *Political Methodology*, 8 (3), 85-109.
- Coufal, T., & Roberts, P. (2009). Feels like the first time: The influence of interpersonal communication, traditional media, and internet sources on first-time voter decision. Paper presented at National Communication Association Annual Convention.
- Dermondy, J., Hanmer-Lloyd, S., & Scullion, R. (2010). Young people and voting behavior: Alienated youth and (or) an interested and critical citizenry? *European Journal of Marketing*, 44, 3/4, 421-435.
- De Zúñiga, Homero Gil (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 319-336.
- Dillman D. (2007). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored designed method*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Edwards, J. L. (2009). Presidential campaign cartoons and political authenticity: visual reflections in 2008. In Robert E. Denton (Ed.), *The 2008 presidential campaign: a communication perspective* (pp. 191-205). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Elden, J. M. (1981). Political efficacy at work: The connection between more autonomous forms of workplace organization and a more participatory politics. *The American Political Science Review*. 75 (1), 43-75
- Eveland Jr., W. P., McLeod, D. M. & Nathanson, A. I. (1994). Reporters vs. undecided voters: An analysis of the questions asked during the 1992 presidential debates. *Communication Quarterly*, 42(4), 390-406. doi:10.1080/01463379409369945

- Finkel, S.E. (1981). Reciprocal effects of participation and political efficacy: A panel analysis. *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Fournier, P., Nadeau, R., Blais, A., Gidengil, E., & Nevitte, N. (2004). Time-of-voting decision and susceptibility to campaign effects. *Electoral Studies*, 23, 661-681.
- Garramore, G. M. & Atkin, C. K. (1986). Mass communication and political socialization: specifying the effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50, 76 – 86.
- Greenberg, E. S. (1981). Industrial self management and political attitude. *American Political Science Review*, 75 (March): 29-42.
- Gronbeck, B. E. (2009) The Web campaign 07-08, and engaged citizens: political ,social and moral consequences. In Robert E. Denton (Ed.), *The 2008 presidential campaign: a communication perspective* (pp. 228-241).Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Habuchi , I.; Ito , M.; Okabe , D.; Matsuda , M. (2005) . *Personal, portable, pedestrian: Mobile phones in Japanese life*. MIT Press.
- Han, G. (2008). New media use, sociodemographics, and voter turnout in the 2000 presidential election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11, 62–81.
- Highton, B. and Wolfinger, R. E. (2001). The first seven years of the political life cycle. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(1), 202-209.
- Jung, N. (2011). The mediating role of knowledge and efficacy in the effects of communication on political participation. *Mass Communication & Society* 14 (4). 407.
- Katz, E. (1996). And deliver us from segmentation. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546, 22-23.
- Kelso, W. (1978). *American democratic theory: Pluralism and its critics*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood.
- Kenski, K., & Stroud, N. J. (2006). Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50 (2), 173-192.

- Kitechs, J. T., Powell, L. (2003). Information, please? Information seeking, mass media, and the undecided voter. *Communication Research Reports*, 20 (1), 73-81.
- Kim, Y-M., & Geidner, N. (2008). *Politics as friendship: The impact of online social networks on young voters' political behavior*. Paper presented at the 2008 International Communication Association Annual Convention, Quebec, Canada.
- Kreuter, F., Presser, S., & Tourangeau, R. (2008). Social desirability bias in CATI, IVR and web surveys: The effects of mode and question sensitivity. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72, 847-865.
- Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? College students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 Election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 13 (5), 608-630.
- Lee, K. M. (2006). Effects of Internet use on college students' political efficacy. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 9 (4), 415 -422.
- Lee, T. (2005). Media effects on political disengagement revisited: A multiple-media approach. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82 (2), 416-433.
- Ling, R. (2004). *The mobile Connection: The cell phone's impact on society*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufman.
- Ling , R. (2008). *New tech, new ties: How mobile communication is reshaping social cohesion*. MIT Press.
- Mason, R. (1982). *Participatory and workplace democracy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- McGrath, M. (2011). Technology, media, and political participation. *National Civic Review*, 100 (3), 41-44.
- Melillo, W. (2004). In search of swingers. *MediaWeek*. 14(28). 6-8.
- Morrell, M. E. (2003). Survey and experimental evidence for a reliable and valid measure of internal political efficacy. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67 (4), 589-602.

- Niemi, R. G., Craig, S.C., & Mattei, F. (1991). Measuring internal political efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study. *The American Political Science Review*, 85 (4), 1407-1413.
- Nir, L. (2012). Public space: How shared news landscapes close gaps in political engagement. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 56(4), 578-596.
- Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinkleton, B.E., Austin, E.W.(2001). Individual motivations, perceived media importance, and political disaffection. *Political Communication*. 18(3), 321-334
- Quarles, R. (1979). Mass media use and voting behavior: the accuracy of political perceptions among first-time and experienced voters. *Communication Research*, 6(4), 407-436. doi: 10.1177/009365027900600402.
- Scheufele, D. A. & Nisbet, M. C. (2003). Being a citizen online: New opportunities and dead ends. *Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics*, 7 (3), 55 – 75.
- Schrum, L. J. (2002). The implications of the survey method for measuring cultivation effects. *Human Communication Research*, 33, 64-80.
- Smerecnik, K., & Dionisopoulos, G. (2009). McCain's issue framing in 2008: The environment as freedom and a commodity. In R. E. Denton, Jr. (Ed.). *The 2008 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective*. UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Strömbäck, J., & Shehata, A. (2010). Media malaise or a virtuous circle? Exploring the causal relationships between news media exposure, political news attention and political interest. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49 (5), 575-597.
- The United States Studies Center (2012). Swing states. Retrieved from <http://uselectionwatch12.com/the-battles/swing-states>.
- Tewksbury, D., Hals, M. L., & Bibart, A. (2008). The efficacy of news browsing: the relationship of news consumption style to social and political efficacy. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 85 (2), 257-272.

- Thompson, D. F. (1970). *The democratic citizen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, W. J. (2008). Politics and media in cyberspace: Two explorations of the Internet's growing influence. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 52 (1), 153 -155.
- Wilner, E. (2012). Romney and Republicans outspent Obama, but couldn't out-advertise him. *Advertising Age*. Retrieved: http://adage.com/article/campaign-trail/romney-outspent-obamaadvertise/238241/?utm_source=daily_email&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=adage
- Winneg, K. M. (2011). *Testing the mobilization and reinforcement hypothesis and predictors of voting in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Convention. Boston, MA.
- Zhou, Y. (2012). Modeling the effects of political information source use and online expression on young adults' political efficacy. *Mass Communication & Society*, 15 (6), 813-830.
- Zhou, Y., & Pinkleton, B. E. (2012). Modeling the effects of political information source use and online expression on young adults' political efficacy. *Mass Communication & Society*, 15(6), 813-830.

Table 1

Predictors of Political Efficacy

	General population (n=252)		Students (n=394)	
	Beta	t	Beta	t
Political online media use	0.35*	4.18	0.31*	5.61
National news media use	0.15	1.71	-0.06	-0.97
Local news media use	0.07	0.80	0.01	0.19
Amount of political social media posts received	-0.07	-0.87	0.13*	2.24
Gender	-0.21*	-3.08	0.09	1.73
Total Household Income	-.01	-0.22	0.05	0.91
Age*	0.11	1.35	0.20*	3.65
Education	0.25*	3.27	n.a.	
Voter Decisiveness	0.19*	2.38	0.14*	2.53
<hr/>				
Adjusted R ²	0.33		0.21	

*Significant at $p < 0.05$