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

PURPOSES OF STUDY

- Analyze the news media usage behaviors of undecided voters and compare different levels of undecidedness of undecided voters in a swing state.
- Examine the role of national and local news media in political decision making and participation among the undecided voters (relationship between political efficacy and geographic scope of news media).
- Analyze the political use of online media and how social media is used for political information.
- Provide a clear picture between news media use and political efficacy of undecided voters.
- Compare the similarities and differences in undecided voters and relationship between local and national election efficacy.
- Compare first-time and general population undecided voters.
Mail and web survey in a mid-size U.S. local market from September 6 to 30, 2012.

General Population: a simple random sample from Northwest Ohio residents database (n=1500) with $1 cash incentive (mail survey)

College students (1st time voters): convenience sample recruited from 36 small general education classes and two large lecture classes from BGSU (web survey)
Totally undecided voters: those who planned to vote but have not decided on any candidate.

Partially undecided voters: Those who planned to vote and have decided to vote for some of the candidates.

Political efficacy: Niemi, Craig & Mattei’s (1991) 4-item scale

Election efficacy: whether their vote will affect the outcome of the election.
Local news media use: use of local TV news, local daily newspapers print or online, suburban newspapers and free tabloids, ethnic newspapers and radio news in hrs/wk

National news media use: National broadcast network news, cable TV network news, news magazines, social network sites, non-newspaper web sites, blogs, online video & audio news in hrs/wk

Online social media as source of election info: from none to more than 50 posts

Political online media use: based on March 2011 Pew Internet & American Life Survey 10 items. e.g., “Tell others your candidates’ preference or opinion about the election”
A total of 647 responses received:

- 253 residents (response rate was 21.32% excluding the undeliverable surveys)
- 394 college students
- Age: Residents average: 56
- Students average: 19
- More partially undecided voters than totally undecided voters
Profiles of Undecided Voters

- General population much less undecided voters than first-time college student voters:
  - 67% of students totally undecided
  - 47% of general population totally undecided
- General population, lower education and lower income were more likely to be totally undecided voters
- College students, women and lower income were more likely to be totally undecided
- Political ideology: overwhelmingly neutral, no liberal in general population and very few liberal in first-time voters
Overall internal political efficacy was low (12.1/20 general pop, 9.7/20 students)

Internal political efficacy positively correlated with national election and local election efficacy.

Totally undecided voters have lower internal political efficacy score than partially undecided voters.
Despite low internal efficacy score, majority believe in their vote will affect the outcome of the election

- General population: 65.3% national, 61.3% local
- Students: 54.7% national, 58.5% local
- Local news media use ($r=0.34$, $p < 0.01$) more significantly correlated with political efficacy than national news media ($r=0.17$, $p < 0.01$)
- Stronger relationship between news media use and gen. population than students
Low use of online media for political activities even among college students

More than one half did not participate in any political related activities.

Posts related to social media is only significant predictor of political efficacy for students, not for general population.
# PREDICTORS OF POLITICAL EFFICACY

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<th>GENERAL POPULATION (N=252)</th>
<th>STUDENTS (N=394)</th>
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<tr>
<td>POLITICAL ONLINE MEDIA USE*</td>
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<td>NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA USE</td>
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| ADJUSTED R²                  | 0.34            | 0.17  |
First-time voters: Totally undecided voters used more local news media than partially undecided, not statistically sig.

General population voters: Partially undecided voters used more news media in both national and local news media than totally undecided voters, not statistically sig.
General population: **TV most important (53.8%)**, Internet distant second (18.2%), newspapers only mentioned by 11% of totally undecided voters.

College students: **Internet most important (44.3%)**, TV (36.1%), only 2% newspapers as most important.
Swing states display moderate level of political efficacy (over 50% believe their vote can change the outcome of the election).

Big gap between internal political efficacy and election efficacy shows importance of environmental factors – “swing state” framing

Higher use of news media by partially undecided voters – campaign effort in news media should target at partially undecided voters more than totally undecided voters
Lack of Liberals in undecided voters show campaigns should target at conservatives or those who are neutral in political ideology.

First time voters slower in political decision making and lower political efficacy.

Strong correlation between online political media use and political efficacy shows self-selection trend. No significant relation between news media use and political efficacy shows that news media is not mobilizing, but creating public space to share common political info/agenda.

Effect of social media is still limited to college students mostly.