It'S Time to Vote: Fit Between Construal Level and Temporal Distance on Political Persuasion

Hakkyun Kim, University of Minnesota
Akshay Rao, University of Minnesota
Angela Y. Lee, Northwestern University

In political campaigns candidates communicate with voters for a long period of time before the actual choice decision. What these candidates say and to whom as well as how they say it, is likely critical to their success. We draw from temporal construal theory to predict that the degree of abstraction (“why” laden appeals) versus concreteness (“how” laden appeals) of the message will be differentially persuasive depending on the temporal proximity of the choice. In three studies the effect is found to be strongest for uninvolved and uninformed subjects, who are more likely to be persuaded by peripheral cues.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13293/volumes/v35/NA-35

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The general topic of voter persuasion and voting behavior has historically attracted academic attention in several disciplines including journalism, political science, economics (specifically, public choice), and, more recently, psychology. But, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000, Klein and Ahluwalia 2005), the field of consumer behavior has largely been silent about political persuasion. This gap in our literature needs to be corrected for three fairly obvious reasons. First, based on the sheer volume of money spent on political campaigns, the Marketing of political candidates is an important economic activity.1 Second, the field of consumer behavior has a unique intellectual basis from which to address the issue of political persuasion and choice. Third, studying consumers’ choice of political candidate is arguably at least as important as studying which brand of carbonated soft drink they prefer or purchase. Therefore, in this special session, we bring together three papers that examine the factors that influence message persuasiveness, as well as voter choice.

In the first paper, Hedgcock, Rao and Chen examine whether the “attraction effect” can be employed to study three-person races. In particular, drawing from a recent episode in U. S. electoral history, they ask whether the entry and exit of a “decoy” (such as Ralph Nader) would have benefited a “target” (such as Al Gore) more so than if the decoy had never entered the race. That is, does a “phantom decoy” that is no longer available for selection still benefit the most similar of the remaining alternatives. Using a variety of stimuli, the authors report on three completed studies that show how the entry and exit of a decoy does in fact benefit the target. Further, they provide evidence for a process that explains the results.

In the second paper, Berger, Meredith and Wheeler report on two completed studies that underline the importance of situational cues in voting decisions. In light of the ubiquity of churches and schools as voting locations, their field and experimental findings that voters might support initiatives consistent with the mission of the polling place are noteworthy.

In the final paper, Kim, Rao and Lee report on three completed studies that consider temporal distance, message type, and audience properties on persuasion. Their premise is that swing voters are more likely to determine the eventual outcome of most elections, and these swing voters tend to be relatively “uninformed” and “uninformed”. It is these voters who are more persuaded by abstract messages when the choice is in the distant relative to the near future. Conversely, concrete messages are more persuasive when decisions are temporally proximal.

The objectives of our session are two-fold. First, each of the papers offers a theoretical advance on a consumer behavior issue. Hedgcock et al. provide evidence of the process underlying the attraction effect, Berger et al. demonstrate the impact of subtle environmental cues on malleable consumer preferences, and Kim and Rao successfully marry construal level theory with persuasion. Second, we bridge conceptual (BDT, psychology) and substantive (Consumer Behavior and Political Persuasion) perspectives in this session.

The importance of public choice as an area of study for consumer behavior scholars can not be overemphasized. Theoretically, voting behavior is an interesting topic of inquiry because it is infrequent but predictable, and requires a choice that a priori likely has little impact on the eventual outcome. Substantively, voting is critical to the functioning of our democracy and civil society. This topic therefore appeals to a broad array of scholars ranging from cognitive and social psychologists to those trained in the BDT tradition who are interested in processes underlying choice, as well as public policy oriented researchers who are interested in political choice as a phenomenon of interest in its own right.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Could Ralph Nader’s Exit Have Helped Al Gore? The Impact of Decoy Entry and Exit on Consumer Choice”
William Hedgcock, University of Minnesota
Akshay Rao, University of Minnesota and Hong Kong University of Science & Technology
Haipeng (Allan) Chen, Texas A & M University

Individuals are frequently faced with making a new choice decision after a preferred option becomes unavailable. A preferred political candidate may lose in a primary, or a preferred vacation alternative may be sold out. Similarly, in software markets that feature “vaporware” (pre-announced but unavailable computer software), in the case of sold-out movies and shows, in the selection of dating partners or employees and jobs, in department stores where advertised items may be out-of-stock, in the case of pre-announced automobiles, and in the purchase of real estate, preferred options often either become unavailable or emerge during the choice process (Wedell and Pettibone 1996).

Prior research in marketing on the “attraction effect” has demonstrated how the introduction of an option into a choice set changes the choice shares of existing options, such that the share of an existing option increases following the introduction of a similar (generally dominated) option (Huber, Payne and Puto 1982). We examine the related but heretofore unaddressed issue of whether the exit of an option from a choice set returns the choice shares of the original options to the status quo ante.

In the first study, we examine support for our foundational prediction, that exposure to a selectable decoy influences choice shares even after the decoy becomes unavailable. The study was motivated by the speculation that Ralph Nader’s entry and exit might have helped Al Gore more than if Nader had never entered the race. Therefore, in the first study we examine choices among unidentified political candidates. We observe that when an option (“the decoy”) turns out to be unselectable following a decision problem in which it was selectable, the choice shares of the remaining options are predictably different, such that more people pick the target and fewer people pick the competitor, relative to a setting in which the option was unselectable to start with. That is, we observe an attraction effect even after a decoy has disappeared from the choice set.

Based on a review of the literature, we examine three potential explanations for this attraction effect. First, the initial availability of the decoy may increase the weight assigned to the attribute on

which the decoy excels, by increasing the frequency of options that score high on that attribute. Following a choice process that considers this increased weight, a subsequent choice process after the decoy turns out to not be available may still emphasize that attribute and therefore yield an attraction effect. Second, the consideration of the decoy in the initial choice stage may change the value of the two focal options by shifting the reference point against which the target and the rival will be evaluated. A decoy located closer to the target may shift the reference point towards the target, as a result of which the target becomes less of a loss on one attribute and more of a gain on the other attribute. Due to loss aversion, the target may become more attractive relative to the rival due to the shift of the reference point. Finally, the unavailability of the decoy might make a similar target appear more attractive, as people may pick among the remaining options based on how similar they are to the decoy.

To examine the various explanations for the observed attraction effect, in a second experiment we directly measure the weight shift, value shift and similarity heuristic based explanations. The approach we employed was similar to Study I, except the stimuli we used described unidentified brands of beer. We chose this product stimulus because it is relatively familiar to student subjects, and we were interested in assessing the process that underlies our phenomenon, an assessment that was likely to be easier for familiar products. Our results indicate that the attraction effect is mediated by weight shift and use of a similarity heuristic, but not by value shift. In the last study, we replicate the basic finding in five different settings. In addition, we measure the response time that is associated with different choices under different experimental conditions, in an effort to shed further light on the cognitive processes underlying this effect. This study was conducted on personal computers utilizing response time tracking technology (E-Prime®). In addition to finding support for the basic prediction, we also observe that the consideration of the additional option in the initial decision changes the speed of decision making in the subsequent decision, in a manner that is consistent with weight shift and the use of a similarity heuristic.

“Can Where People Vote Influence How They Vote? The Influence of Polling Location Type on Voting Behavior”
Jonah Berger, Stanford University
Marc Meredith, Stanford University
Christian Wheeler, Stanford University

Voting decisions are some of the most important choices people make. They influence how money is spent, whether certain acts (e.g., gay marriage) are legal or illegal, and even whether or not the country is at war. Although many factors can influence voting preferences, political scientists have generally not studied influences on voting that operate after voters reach the polling place. That is, most research either implicitly or explicitly assumes that voters have stable voting intentions that are subsequently converted into a vote. Research on environmental cues, however, suggests that the cues prevalent in different environments can have significant effects on judgments and behavior. Building on such work, this paper examines the intriguing possibility that where people are assigned to vote (e.g., a firehouse, church, school, etc.) can influence how they vote. Supporting this proposition, we use precinct-level data from Arizona’s 2000 general election and find that voting in schools increases the support for school spending initiatives.

Environmental cues prevalent at differing polling locations differ in systematic ways, and we argue these differences can influence voting outcomes. Research has shown that features of the environment can automatically activate associated representations in memory and affect behavior without the actor’s intention or awareness (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows 1996). For example, exposure to business-related objects such as briefcases can make individuals act more competitively (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004), exposure to stereotypes can make individuals feel and act like members of the stereotyped group (DeMarree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2005), and exposure to normative environments (e.g., libraries) can make people act in accordance with associated norms (e.g., speaking quietly; Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003). Based upon such research, we predicted that exposure to a school environment could increase activation of school-related norms, identity aspects, and stereotypes, which could then influence actual votes toward education-related initiatives (e.g., to increase school spending).

Using data from Arizona’s 2000 presidential election, we found support for the notion that environmental factors can influence voting behavior. We collected precinct-level voting results, polling location data, and demographic data from all Arizona precincts, and focused on a ballot initiative that proposed raising the state sales tax to fund additional school spending. We used a Goodman regression framework and controlled for political views using votes for president and 13 other initiatives. Using this model specification, we found that those who were assigned to vote in schools were more likely to support the initiative to increase school spending. We also used a number of control group specifications to ensure the robustness of our results. The most stringent control group addressed possible non-random placement of voters into polling locations (e.g. people with children are more likely to live near and hence vote at schools) by comparing those who lived near schools and were assigned to vote at schools vs. those who lived near schools and were assigned to vote in a different location. We used 9-digit zip codes to identify polling locations near schools, thereby constructing two groups of voters who were similar in all characteristics (e.g. age, income, number of kids) except where they are assigned to vote. Our estimates show that using this quasi-experimental design, Arizonians who voted in schools were still significantly more likely to vote in favor of increasing the sales tax. These findings were generally robust across the several additional control group specifications we utilized.

In a follow-up experiment, we manipulated environmental cues by randomly assigning participants to view pictures of schools, churches (the other most common polling location), or generic buildings. Then, ostensibly as part of another experiment, participants indicated their voting preference on a number of initiatives, including the Arizona education initiative used in our field study. Results indicated that exposure to the school images increased support for the education initiative. Additional analyses showed that the effect of the images was larger among non-parents and among those opposed to taxes. Specifically, parents and those with favorable attitudes were likely to support the initiative regardless of which images they viewed. However, non-parents and those with negative attitudes toward taxes were more likely to support the initiative after viewing pictures of the schools. Hence, the effect of environmental cues on voting was strongest among those not already predisposed to favor the initiative.

This work highlights the fact that many voters may lack strong and stable intentions that guide their behavior and has implications for voting policy decisions. More broadly, this research illustrates the importance of simple environmental cues in directing behavior, even highly consequential behavior that occurs in “noisy” real-world environments.
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With the increased penetration of cable television, talk radio and weblogs (popularly referred to as “blogs”), the coverage of political topics and campaigns now appears to be ubiquitous and incessant. This expansion of media outlets and the accompanying increase in media coverage has had a predictable effect on political expenditures as well. For instance, the most expensive Senate race in 2002 was in North Carolina, where the candidates spent a little over $27 million (roughly $3.20 per resident), whereas in 2004 over $37 million was spent by the candidates (about $525 per resident) in that year’s most expensive Senate race (Daschle vs. Thune in South Dakota). When all the data come in, the figure for the 2006 mid-term elections is expected to reach $2.6 billion (Mooney 2006). Most of these campaign expenditures are incurred on marketing activities such as advertising and “get out the vote” efforts. These Marketing activities are designed to persuade undecided voters and assure the turnout of voters who are favorably inclined towards the candidate.

In political campaigns (as well as in several other Marketing communication settings), candidates communicate with voters for a long period of time before the actual choice decision. What these candidates say and to whom as well as how they say it, is likely critical to their success. Partisans (who are relatively brand loyal) are asked for money, time, and effort, while swing voters (who are not brand loyal) are asked for electoral support on Election Day. We draw from temporal construal theory to predict that the degree of abstraction (“why” laden appeals) versus concreteness (“how” laden appeals) of the message is differentially persuasive depending on the temporal proximity of the choice.

In a first study we empirically observe support for this foundational prediction. Stimuli featured an androgynous political candidate for U. S. Senate (Pat Darvell). Messages emphasizing high-level goals were more effective when the respondent expected to act in the distant future (action was needed six months from the present), whereas political messages focusing on low-level actions were more effective when the respondent expected to act in the immediate future (action was needed next week).

Two follow-up studies were conducted. In the first follow-up study, rather than manipulate temporal construal, we measured subjects’ chronic construal level. And, in the second follow-up study, rather than manipulate temporal distance to the decision (as in the very first study), we asked subjects to imagine that they would need to vote using an absentee ballot either next week or a few months from now. These methodological variations were introduced to expand the scope of operationalizations of the focal construct. In the first of the follow-up studies we observe the effect to be strongest for subjects who were uninvolved. In the last study, we observe the effect to be strongest for subjects who were uninvolved. Apparently, unlike politically involved and savvy subjects, uninvolved and uninformed subjects were more likely to be persuaded by peripheral cues.

The argument that the fit between temporal distance and message type is relevant to the persuasiveness of the message is a novel insight. Further, we observed the effect when temporal distance was manipulated (studies 1 and 3) and when the respondent’s chronic tendency to represent events in either an abstract or concrete manner varied naturally (study 2). These results provide convergent evidence that it is the match between the message content and the underlying mental representation that yields the effect on persuasion. Finally, that the construal fit effect is contingent on involvement is generally consistent with the finding that involvement moderates regulatory fit effects (Wang and Lee 2006). The finding that expertise plays a similar role is also noteworthy, particularly from a pragmatic perspective, since political campaigns appear to be focused on “swing” voters who are deemed to be either uninterested, uninformed, or uninvolved (Rao 2007).

SELECTED REFERENCES