

Media's effects on political voters assignment



Media's Effects on Political Voters BY Retraced Voter predispositions, political naivety and persuasive advertising: voting is no longer based on policy and beliefs The effect that the media has on voters can be extremely diverse. From entirely formulating an opinion to strengthening an existing one, the media has the ability to do both but not to every type of individual. In order to understand how various citizens are influenced by media messages, Philip Converse et al. (1966) separated voters into three distinct groups: those with the highest levels of political awareness and understanding, those with the lowest levels and those of intermediate understanding. In alignment with this, Grabber (1984) theorized that a voter's predispositions are the vital determinant when examining how effectively the media's messages can sway opinions. It is therefore voters' prior knowledge and understanding of political happenings that formulates the foundation for their decisions and thus their naivety of such happenings that allows them to be swayed by media messages.

Extending on Converse's theory, he states that those with the highest levels of existing political awareness are the most likely to watch TV news coverage of political campaigns' (1966 cited in Denmark 2002, p. 663). However these individuals are actually the least likely to be impacted by these media messages due to their strong predispositions and resilient political beliefs (Denmark 2002, p. 664) leading them to use 'selective perception' (Erikson et al. 1991).

Selective perception according to Erikson (1991) is essentially when the viewers pay attention to the messages that support their party or candidate and ignore or avoid opposing adverts as a way to reinforce their original

decision. This is supported by Bryant and Heath's model of 'uses and gratifications' (1992, p. 82), which states that individuals only, 'pay attention to messages about things that are needed or gratifying and essentially disregard any ideals to the contrary.

In accordance with these assertions, it is strongly upheld that Partisanship is the most significant constraint on media effects (Erikson et al. 1991). Due to strong party loyalties, many voters have made their decision long before the campaign has begun (Denmark AAA). Therefore it is these voters with the highest levels of political awareness and understanding that will almost never waiver, at any point in time, with their decision to vote for their beloved party as they will only use media messages to reinforce their position.

As opposed to those with the highest levels of political awareness, those with the lowest or 'unsophisticated voters' (Denmark Bibb) are the most likely to be influenced by the media 'because their weakly formulated or non-existent political predispositions provide them with no evaluative defense' (Cialdini 1991, p. 1216). Within Australia, this group of individuals is an obvious target for media messages to try and persuade them to vote for a particular party due to the nation's compulsory voting system.

Whereas in nations such as the USA a voluntary voting system is used and it is common to see up to 50% of citizens not participating (Denmark AAA). These are the nation's 'least interested and informed individuals' (Denmark 2002). However whilst they are the most open to influence, Grabber (1984) contends that any media effect on voting behavior 'hinges on the interaction between audiences and messages'. Which, due to their disinterest, is almost

no interaction and thus they are hardly affected by media messages (Converse et al. 1966). The media uses a method of "Agenda Priming" whereby the media draws the attention of viewers and readers to certain aspects as being the most important (Ward 1995, p. 55). This helps people make judgments that effortlessly come to mind when attempting to vote. In the case of disinterested voters, the media positions the candidates as the object of voting, not the parties or policies, because judging human character is something every individual is capable of.

It becomes candidate against candidate as the media 'structure and stage campaign activities to make them newsworthy which has enhanced showmanship at the expense of substance' (Grabber 1997, p. 242).

Nonetheless, whilst these voters are the most desired victims of media persuasion they are also the most likely to not bother trying to be persuaded and hence are likely to decide their vote in the last few days of a campaign (Converse et al. 1966) who they like more, simply because they must. Finally those of moderate understanding are waiting to be persuaded.

They are interested enough to engage in media messages but are not tied to any particular party or candidate (Converse et al. 1966). The use of "Agenda Setting" here is vital as the media has the ability to 'influence those issues, events, themes, or persons that the public considers important enough to think about' (Shapiro 1964, p. 64) which can then influence the decisions of its moderately interested voters. This is where advertising is pivotal. Short, sharp advertisements, void of any complex policies help voters make decisions based on candidates and the political simplicities of elections (Denmark choc).

Unobtrusive issues such as foreign affairs (Denmark Bibb) have substantial impact as they are “ primed” by the media to be the important issues that voters cannot hear about from anywhere else. So their impact is heightened as ‘ perceived issue salience becomes the independent variable and influences the role that these issues or considerations play when an individual makes a judgment about a political actor’ (Scuffle 2000, p. 300). Such salience can either persuade voters to change direction on their initial thoughts or be used to confirm existing beliefs, this is known as ‘ congruence’ (Denmark 20th).

Thus it is this level of voters who have the ability to create different political outcomes as they can be persuaded from one election to the next. The use of influential advertising focused on the media asserted “ major” issues coupled with a strong political candidate is likely to sway a voter in favor of that particular party. However advertising focused on obtrusive issues (Denmark Bibb), which the voters are already aware of, and mundane party policies will lose their attention and reinforce their initial beliefs.

These voters are both likely and unlikely to be swayed by media messages if it is done correctly as they are interested enough to engage in the news. Either way, their decision will be made early on in the political campaign (Converse et al. 1966) and so enticing coverage is paramount. Thus it is evident that voters’ prior knowledge and understanding of political happenings can decide their vote without media intervention. However it is those that are relatively naive to political happenings throughout the electoral campaign which desire persuasion by engaging advertising that then have a substantial influence the political outcome.