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Election Marketing to Young Voters: Which Media is Most Important?

Robert P. Ormrod and Heather Savigny

AARHUS
UNIVERSITY
BUSINESS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

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Robert P. Ormrod Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Economics and Business

Aarhus University

Heather Savigny Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer

Department of Political, Social and International Studies

University of East Anglia

Abstract

Young voters between 18 and 24 are a key target segment for political marketers, but this age group is less likely to vote than other age groups. This paper is motivated by a desire to understand the relative importance of various media to 18-24 year old voters, with the aim of providing political marketers with an indication of how best to prioritise their marketing efforts: is the primary source of political information for young people the new media, or does the mass media still serve its traditional function? Using a Best-Worst Scaling method, this study looks at the relative importance of seven media as political information sources during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. These political information sources are: TV/Radio news, Newspapers, the Leaders' Debate, Election Posters, Online Social Media, Party Election Broadcasts and Party Websites. Results indicate that the traditional mass media still functions as the primary information source for 18-24 year olds, whilst online and party-controlled media are considered less important. Therefore, we argue that an online presence is a necessary but not sufficient element of an election campaign, and that the traditional mass media can be prioritised as the core political information source for 18-24 year olds.

Introduction and Background

Young voters are a key target group for political marketers; however, 18 to 24 year olds are significantly less likely to vote than those aged 25 and above (Fieldhouse et al., 2007). Studies highlight concerns the 18-24 year olds have little interest in politics in general, lack knowledge about political issues (Heath & Park, 1997; Park, 2000) and are less likely to actively support political parties (Cole, 1997; Russell et al., 2002). This alienation from the formal processes of politics (Henn & Weinstein, 2006) is not merely confined to the UK (Forbrig, 2005), although research has emerged which challenges the assumption of disillusionment, suggesting that the young have a political consciousness which sees them mobilised in other forms of political partcipation (see e.g. Pleyers, 2005).

The response of politicians and party professionals has been to focus on how to engage younger voters, especially using the electronic media (e.g., websites, text messages). For example, in the 1997 UK General Election, Labour sought to attract younger voters through their 'R U Up 4 it?' website (Ward & Gibson, 2003). Political initiatives designed to attract younger voters have focused on the methods or mechanisms of engagement (Henn & Weinstein, 2006). This focus upon technology and rules of engagement is then at the expense of addressing policy content and the alienation from the political process which may be felt by younger voters. This focus on technology is based on the assumption that younger voters use this medium as a source of political information.

This paper is motivated by a desire to understand the relative importance of various media to 18-24 year old voters, with the aim of providing political marketers with an indication of how best to prioritise their marketing efforts: is the primary source of political information for young people the online (social) media, or does the mass media still serve its traditional function? Our investigation uses the context of the UK General Election of 2010, an election that was novel in many ways with regard to the role and importance of the media as a tool for conducting political marketing activities. Not only did the internet play a far greater role than in previous elections – the 2010 General Election was heralded as the 'internet election' (Arthur, 2010) – but events in the broadcast media, especially the three Leaders' debates, undoubtably influenced the outcome of the election. This paper begins by providing an overview of the seven media that will be used in this study, and we then present the Best-Worst Scaling (BWS) method used in our paper. Following this, we present the results and analysis of our investigation. Finally, we discuss the limitations and implications of our investigation, and provide suggestions for future research directions.

Media Alternatives

In the post war era there has been a trend towards the increased visibility of political party leaders in the mass media (Langer, 2007). The 'presidentialisation' of election campaigns is most clearly manifested through the televising of the leaders' debates, having a long lineage in the US from the

Kennedy/Nixon debate in 1960 to the present day (Mancini & Swanson, 1996). The 2010 UK General Election was the first time that leadership debates had been held on live, nationwide television. The party leaders of the three largest parties, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg, were given equal billing in the three debates. Due to the debates' novelty value, their screening at peak viewing times, accessibility to the vast majority of the population and their high viewing ratings, Clegg's performance in the first debate arguably led to a shift in the opinion polls towards Clegg's party and a change of tactics by the Conservative Party (Guardian, 2010a).

The leadership debates were significant events for the news media in three ways. Firstly, the leadership debates reasserted the the importance of radio and television news and the ability of the mass media to function as a mechanism through which the electorate could engage with the major political parties, with around 9 million viewers tuning in to the first and third debates (Broadcastors' Audience Research Board, 2010). Secondly, the leadership debates altered the terms of debate, as whilst the election had initially been seen as a two horse race between the Conservative and Labour parties, Clegg's inclusion and performance propelled his party, the Liberal Democrats, into a position where there was discussion within the media as to the possibility of them playing a key role in the formation of a government. Finally, the leadership debates cemented the ability of the traditional print and broadcast media to set the news agenda and the parameters of the debate.

The internet played a different role from the news media. Surveys showed that by 2010, 60% of British adults accessed the internet on a daily basis (National Statistics, 2010) and almost 50% of the British population used online sources for gathering information at some point during the election campaign (Arthur, 2010). Using the internet for social activities such as blogging and uploading self-created content is widespread amongst younger adults (47% and 75% respectively for the under 25's; National Statistics, 2010). Blogging by candidates and using social media such as Youtube and twitter thus provided a cost-effective method of reaching out to the 18-24 year olds (and the population in general), although this may simply be a case of 'preaching to the converted', as some commentators have noted that individuals tend to seek out opinions that fit with their own world view (Arthur, 2010).

Finally, posters assumed the role in the General Election of vehicles for entertainment rather than education about party policies. The negative tone that characterised the campaign was especially visible in the election posters, both those posters that were physically placed on hoardings and those that were only released online (see Guardian, (2010b) for examples of official and unofficial posters[1]). Many of the online official posters were computer manipulated to change the message, and whilst these were generally considered to be 'spoof' advertising, some of the altered posters became just as well-known than the originals; for example, Labour's 'Don't let him [David Cameron] take Britain back to the 1980's poster (Guardian, 2010b). The Conservative Party used the same poster but changed the text to 'Fire up the Quattro, it's time for change' to convey a positive message.

Method

[1] Some of the posters presented on this website have been graffitied with graphic language.

BWS is a method for assessing the relative importance of a series of attributes or issues that was first popularised in consumer research in the early 1990's by Finn and Louviere (1992). The BWS method is becoming more widely used in the literature to uncover the relative importance of a set of product attributes (e.g., Cohen, 2009; Mueller & Rungie, 2009) or more general issues (e.g., Auger et al. 2007; Lee et al. 2007; Louviere et al., 2008) in fields as diverse as wine marketing (e.g., Remaud & Lockshin, 2009) and healthcare (Flynn et al., 2007; Louviere & Flynn, 2010). However, its use in the political context has remained limited, exceptions being e.g., Remaud and Gillan (2007) and García-Lapresta et al. (2010).

An advantage of the BWS method is that it is not affected by 'floor' or 'ceiling' responses, that is, where respondents consistantly use one end of a Likert-type scale when answering a questionnaire (Cohen, 2009); for example, the BWS method compares attributes against each other rather than as absolute evaluations of the attribute. Thus the BWS method is useful when attributes or issues are compared across different cultural contexts (e.g., Auger et al., 2007; Goodman, 2009; Cohen et al., 2009), or where the attributes or issues are perceived as being sensitive.

BWS is related to the standard paired-preference scale first developed by Thurstone (1927) but overcomes a weakness of the latter, respondent fatigue, by using a balanced incomplete block design (BIBD) to reduce the number of comparisons that the respondent is asked to make to be equal to the number of attributes or issues (Cohen, 2009; Wakeling & Buck, 2001). For example, prioritising 13 issues will result in 13 comparisons in a BIBD but 78 comparisons when using a paired-preference scale. A BIBD presents a subset of attributes or issues; Cohen and Orme (2004) recommend between three and six, depending on the total number of issues. In our investigation we used seven issues and with each question presented the respondents with a choice of one 'most important' and one 'least important' from a list of four issues (thus two issues were neither most nor least important in each comparison, see Appendix 1 for an example question). Each media was assigned an unique number and appeared a total of four times over the seven comparisons, once in each column (the order of media is derived from Cherowitzo, 2010, see Appendix 2). Potential response bias was countered by randomising the order in which the media are presented (Jaeger & Cardello, 2009).

By summing the best-worst scores for each media we derived a per-respondent score that represented the overall importance of each media. In our case, each media appeared four times in the seven questions and so could be selected as the most- or least-preferred option a maximum of four times (giving a total score of between ±4). Therefore, a media that is considered to be important will have a higher number of 'preferred' scores and as such the average score of all respondents will be closer to +4; if the media is considered to be of low importance then its average will tend towards -4.

Results

Discussions with 20 experts led to the selection of seven media as being the most relevant media in the 2010 UK General Election (listed in Table 1). A link to a questionnaire instrument was sent out by e-mail to students at a major UK University in the week following the general election, followed a week later by a reminder e-mail. There were 199 useable responses. The data was imported into an

Excel datafile and scored each media depending on whether it was most preferred (scored as '1') or least preferred (scored as '-1') or neither (scored as '0'). Following this we summed the score for each media to calculate scores for each media as the most important media and the least important media (Table 1).

Information source	Σ (most important)	Σ (least important)	Most-least	SQRT Σ(M)/Σ(L)	Relative selection likelihood (in %)
TV/Radio news	457	34	423	3.67	100
Newspapers	284	67	217	2.06	56.1
Leaders' debate	292	135	157	1.47	40.1
Online social media	156	288	-132	.74	20.2
Party political broadcast	85	272	-187	.56	15.3
Party websites	49	245	-196	.45	12.3
Election posters	17	420	-403	.20	5.5

Table 1: Media arranged by relative importance

Table 1 provides indices of relative importance. The second and third columns provide information on the total number of times that the media was chosen as 'most important' and 'least important', respectively. Subtracting the total least important from the total most important provides an indication of the importance of each media relative to the alternatives. As can be seen in Table 1, the seven media types can be roughly divided up into four groups. The most important media for gaining information during the election campaign were news programs in the broadcast media. This was followed by newspapers and the leaders' debate. The third group consisted of the two internet-based media (online social media and party websites) and the party political broadcasts. Finally, by far the least important media for respondents were the election posters.

By taking the square root of the total most score divided by the total least score it is possible to uncover the relative selection likelihood of each of the media, expressed in the final column as a percentage; this should be understood as for each of the four times TV/Radio appears as a possibility, it is assumed to be chosen every time. If the option 'newspapers' appears and 'TV/Radio' does *not* appear, then 'newspapers' is chosen as most important 56.1% of the time, and likewise, 'Leaders' debate' is chosen as most important 40.1% of the time; the summed percentages are more than 100% as the three media named here can occur independently of each other. Here it should be remember that the option 'TV/Radio news' only appears in four of the seven items. At the opposite end of the importance scale, 'Election posters' would be chosen as most important only 5.5% of the time.

Analysis

The results of our investigation indicate that in our sample, the mass media, both print and broadcast, were the most important sources of information in the 2010 British election campaign. We argue that as modern society is characterised by a lack of time for the average citizen, respondents may have found it convenient to simply orient themselves by watching the television news or listening to the radio for a summary and analysis of the party positions. The Leaders' debate was also considered to be an important source of information on the campaign. This result supports the notion of the 'presidentialisation' of the UK political system as suggested by Mancinin and Swanson (1996), where party leaders are increasingly seen as the voice – and not least the face – of their respective parties. Alternatively, it could be seen as an example of 'political infotainment', that is, where political information is framed as prime-time entertainment with the aim of educating viewers about competing parties' perspectives on core election issues. Whilst the word 'infotainment' is often used in a derogatory way, if the end of increasing citizen awareness of the competing party positions on central policy issues is achieved then this arguably justifies the means.

Irrespective of whether the leaders' debate can be seen as presidentialisation or infotainment (or both), the inclusion of Nick Clegg, the leader of the 'third party', in the three televised debates had far-reaching implications for the nature of the UK political system. Some credit must be given to Clegg's rhetorical ability in these live debates, but the decision to include his party undoubtably had a major effect on the visibility of the Liberal Democrat's political offering, the nature of the campaign and subsequently on the outcome of the election. This arguably supports Kavanagh's (1995) observation that what the media cover *is* the campaign.

On the other hand, those media that were web-based or under the direct control of the party were considered to be the least important sources of information. The online social media (in our case e.g., Twitter, Facebook and blogs), party websites and party political broadcasts were all of approximately the same level of importance. With regard to the online social media, this lack of information may have two sources. On the one hand, candidates may be reluctant to break 'netiquette', that is, being seen to invade citizens' private sphere with political messages (supply-side use of media). On the other hand, voters could simply have not used blogs and Twitter as a source of unmediated political information (demand-side use of media), instead relying on the traditional media. The result that both the party websites and party political broadcasts had a similar level of importance seems to support the demand-side argument.

Finally, election posters were considered to be the least important source of information with a most-least score of -403 and a relative importance of only 5.5%. This could be seen as a reflection of the way in which election posters quickly adopted a negative tone, especially those presented by the Conservative and Labour parties. It can also be argued that the proliferation of 'spoof' posters on the internet also diluted the believability of the information provided by this media, as voters could not be sure of the source of the poster; there were several examples of the text on a poster that supported one of the parties being replaced with a text *against* that same party and published online within a short space of time.

Limitations, Implications and Future Research Directions

Our study is limited by the sample, consisting of University students. This biases the sample to a demographic with a high level of internet proficiency, although surveys have demonstrated that internet proficiency is a general characteristic of 18-24 year olds (National Statistics, 2010). We also acknowledge that the seven media are not a comprehensive selection and that the leadership debate, as an event, may not be entirely comparable with television or radio, a medium; however, we argue that the information that was gained from these sources is the central concern of our study, and so our results can be a useful starting point for future research that includes a more diverse sample and a larger number of media. An implication of our results for political marketing practitioners is that the internet is a *necessary but not sufficient* forum for political competition in the context of an election campaign; political actors have to develop and maintain an online presence but this is not enough to secure election, as newspapers and the broadcast media continue to function as the main information sources for 18-24 year olds. Future research could investigate the correlation between online presence and electoral success to test this result. The second implication is based on the impact of the Leaders' debate, which demonstrated the value of a knowledgable and media-friendly figurehead as a central element of the party offering. Here, research could investigate the effects of Leaders' debates on future campaigns to investigate whether there was a 'novelty factor' rather than a trend towards presidentialisation.

Conclusion

Our investigation asked 18-24 year old voters to state the comparative importance of seven media as information sources about political parties at the UK General Election of May 2010. Despite being heralded as the 'internet election' (e.g. Arthur, 2010), we found that newspapers and the broadcast media remain the most important information source for 18-24 year olds, whilst online social media and party-controlled media were the least important. Therefore, we argue that an online presence is a necessary but not sufficient element of an election campaign, and that political marketers can prioritise the traditional mass media as the core political information source for 18-24 year olds.

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Appendix 1

Out of the following four alternatives, which media provided you with the **most** information about the election campaign, and which media provided you with the **least** information about the election campaign? Please make sure that your answers are different!				
	Newspapers	Leaders' debate	Party websites	Election posters
MOST information		X		
LEAST information				X

Example of the BIBD comparison using four choices per question

Appendix 2

Comparison	Column A	Column B	Column C	Column D
Comparison 1	3	5	6	7
Comparison 2	4	6	7	1
Comparison 3	5	7	1	2
Comparison 4	6	1	2	3
Comparison 5	7	2	3	4
Comparison 6	1	3	4	5
Comparison 7	2	4	5	6

Example of the order of comparisons in a seven-issue BIBD (derived from Cherowitzo 2010)

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