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Revisiting media choice and election turnout

James Simon and Bruce D. Merrill

Introduction

Declining turnout in U.S. elections during the past 30 years has prompted concern about the failure of so many American voters to exercise their franchise on election day. For political scientists, falling turnout is a paradox: increased education levels, affluence and middle class status of voters in the United States are demographic tendencies traditionally associated with growing, not declining, voter participation (Brody, 1978; Cassell & Luskin, 1988). But turnout in the national election with the highest participation rate — the presidential election — dropped from 63 percent of the total voting age population in 1960 to 50 percent in 1988, before rising slightly in 1992 (Crocker, 1992). Election turnouts of less than 50 percent in less publicized campaigns prompt even greater concern about why so many individuals fail to participate.

Efforts to look at how voters obtain campaign information, as a possible predictor of turnout, have produced widely differing results. Reagan & Ducey (1983) looked at voting patterns based on whether respondents used television or newspapers to obtain information on "what the governor... legislature ... (and) Michigan supreme court does." The study found no significant difference between simple reliance on newspapers or television and the decision to cast a ballot. However, voters who spent more than 30 minutes reading a newspaper on an average day were significantly more likely to have voted than those who spent less than 30 minutes.

Latimer and Cotter's replication (1985) of the study also found no significant difference between newspaper or television use and respondents who said they "always vote." However, the study found a significant difference regarding an individual's voting history: 74 percent of the respondents who said they "always vote" relied on newspapers as their primary source of information, compared to 57 percent of respondents who said they never vote. They concluded that newspapers were "pre-eminent as a source of information for those most likely to vote" (Latimer & Cotter, p. 36). Both initial studies dealt with media usage for general political information; neither looked at a voter's source of information for a specific election campaign and whether that individual voted in that specific campaign.

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Kenamer (1987) used path analysis to compare respondents' intention to vote, their attention to newspapers and television news, and demographic variables such as age, education, party identification and political interest. The study suggested that newspapers have an impact on awareness about the campaign and voting, and therefore an indirect influence on turnout. Television was seen as having a more direct impact on voting; the author suggested it may motivate individuals who otherwise would not participate.

Multi-election studies of aggregate turnout have found the decline in newspaper readership to be an important predictor of the decline in turnout in the 1960s and 1970s (Shaffer, 1981; Blumler & McLeod, 1974; Teixeira, 1987). For example, Teixeira focused on the 10-percentage point drop in presidential election turnout between 1960 and 1980 in the National Election Studies (NES) and the 29 percent decrease in active newspaper readership of the NES respondents during the same period. He found that the drop in newspaper readership alone was responsible for 34 percent of the turnout decline in the final four elections of the period, well beyond the impact of the demographic changes examined. He concluded: "Thus, the decline in newspaper reading is the crucial development during this period" (Teixeira, 88).

This study revisits the issue of media use and turnout by using data from an unusual two-part election race: the 1990-91 campaign for governor in Arizona. Unlike earlier studies (Reagan & Ducey, 1983; Latimer & Cotter, 1985), the Arizona study links a voter's choice for campaign information in a specific race with a decision on whether to cast a ballot in that specific race. To compare the Arizona findings to a national sample, the intensity of media use (as measured by the number of days an Arizona voter read a newspaper or watched television news per week) also was examined and then compared to respondents in the 1988 NES survey (Miller, 1989). A distinctive feature of the study was the use of a panel design and the inclusion of voter information regarding two statewide elections held within a four-month period. Panel studies can suffer from changes in the demographic, political and attitudinal characteristics of voters between the first and second interview. Efforts to compare a primary election and subsequent general election in a short time span also suffer because of the different voters participating in the two types of elections. The dual Arizona elections afforded a rare opportunity to analyze more than one voting decision by the same sample of voters within a four-month period, with the issues, candidates and voter demographic characteristics largely held constant. By using two different data points on a respondent's voting behavior, the results might more accurately reflect the turnout pattern than if just one election were used.

The unusual Arizona setting resulted from application of a new, untested law that mandated a runoff election if no candidate received "50% plus one vote" in a statewide general election. Because of the write-in candidacy of an independent candidate, both Republican candidate Fife Symington and Democrat Terry Goddard received about 49 percent of the vote in the November 1990 gubernatorial election, prompting a February 1991 runoff that Symington won.

Methods

The study used a panel design, interviewing the same group of voters three weeks before the February 1991 runoff election for governor and then again within seven days after the runoff. The first wave of the panel study was con-

ducted Feb. 2-3, 1991. A random sample of 402 registered voters living in Arizona was called by telephone and asked questions as part of The Cactus State Poll, conducted jointly by the Cronkite School of Journalism and Telecommunication at Arizona State University and KAET-TV. Respondents were not told of a second round of questioning, thereby reducing any sensitizing to political news in the weeks between the two interviews.

In the followup interview, conducted one week after the Feb. 26, 1991, runoff election, a second set of questions was asked to determine whether respondents had voted in the runoff election, for whom they had voted, and the reason for any switch from the initial gubernatorial choice. Of the 402 original respondents, 59 percent were successfully reinterviewed, 10 percent refused to answer and 30 percent could not be recontacted. A comparison of the 237 voters contacted twice and the 165 voters contacted only in the first wave showed no statistically significant demographic differences. Using the SPSS weighting procedure, male respondents were weighted (by a factor of 1.4) so the gender distribution better approximated the voting population. The confidence interval for the overall study, based on the proportion giving a dichotomous response estimated at 50 percent and calculated at the 95 percent reliability level, was plus or minus 6 percent.

Voters were initially grouped according to the news medium they cited when asked the open-ended Roper-style question, "Where would you say you get most of your news about what's going on in the governor's race?" In cases of multiple responses, the first response was used in the analysis. Eight demographic variables — education, county of residence, age, gender, marital status, political interest, party identification and race — were compared to the voter's media choice for campaign information. Respondents were later grouped into two voting categories: those who said they cast ballots in both elections, and those who cast zero or one ballot. The small number of respondents who said they voted only in the November election (n=23) or the February election (n=18) made it difficult to independently analyze those who voted in just one election.

Finally, the study examined a related issue: the relationship between voting and how often a respondent attended to the news media. Data on the frequency of media usage by Arizona voters was compared to companion questions in the 1988 NES database (Miller, 1989). Both the Arizona and NES databases included questions on how many times a week a respondent read a newspaper and watched television news. The responses were placed into three categories — daily use, three to six times weekly, less than three times weekly — and compared to whether the person voted once (NES) or in both elections (Arizona). (The NES study did not ask voters to identify their primary campaign information source, preventing any direct comparison with the Arizona sample.)

The overall study results were complicated by "social desirability" and the overstating of how many Arizona respondents voted. Ninety percent of the respondents said they cast a ballot in the general election, 85 percent said they voted in the runoff and 81 percent said they voted in both. Actual turnout was 57 percent in the general election and 50 percent in the runoff. The inflated self-identification on turnout paralleled that of similar state-level studies (Reagan & Ducey, 1983; Latimer & Cotter, 1985) and the tendency has been widely reported

in the literature (Clausen, 1968; Shaffer, 1981). One study of self-reported voting measures (Katosh & Traugott, 1981) found inflated figures cause no substantial difference in the usability or explanatory power of that variable.

Findings

Arizona voters relied primarily on television and newspapers for information on the 1990-91 governor's campaign. Asked to identify where they received most of their campaign news, 50 percent of the respondents cited television, 42 percent said newspapers, 5 percent said radio and 3 percent cited other sources. Users of the two dominant media — television and newspapers — became the focus of the subsequent analysis.

There were few demographic or attitudinal differences in usage of television and newspapers (Table 1). Television was the most popular news source

Table 1

Demographic and political characteristics of voters compared to major source of campaign news

	Newsp.	Telev.	TOTAL	(n)	Corr.
OVERALL	44%	56	100%	256	
HS/Less	35%	65	100%	50	.14
Some College	52%	48	100%	95	
College Grad.	40%	60	100%	84	
County					
Rural	44%	56	100%	61	.02
Maricopa	42%	58	100%	125	
Pima	45%	55	100%	42	
Age					
18-39	45%	55	100%	74	.03
40-64	42%	58	100%	93	
65+	46%	54	100%	62	
Male	45%	55	100%	111	.03
Female	42%	58	100%	120	
Unmarried	35%	65	100%	70	.11
Married	48%	52	100%	160	
Follow Politics					
Very Closely	59%	41	100%	63	.27 ^a
Somewhat Cl.	44%	56	100%	129	
Not Very Cl.	16%	84	100%	37	
Republican	44%	56	100%	117	.03
Democrat	45%	55	100%	91	
Other	39%	61	100%	17	
White	45%	55	100%	198	.04
Hispanic	40%	60	100%	12	
Other	38%	62	100%	20	

Cramer's V used to calculate correlations.

^aT-test shows significant relationship ($p < .05$) between second and third rows of variable when compared to media choice.

Table 2
Comparison of voting behavior and demographic characteristics

	Voted Twice	Voted Once/None	TOTAL	(n)	Corr.
OVERALL	81%	19	100%	256	
HS/Less	66%	34	100%	53	-.19 ^{bc}
Some College	82%	18	100%	101	
College Grad.	87%	13	100%	92	
County					
Rural	78%	22	100%	65	.05
Maricopa	82%	18	100%	143	
Pima	80%	20	100%	45	
Age					
18-39	79%	21	100%	82	.07
40-64	80%	20	100%	107	
65+	86%	14	100%	65	
Male	84%	16	100%	129	.08
Female	78%	22	100%	127	
Unmarried	68%	32	100%	79	.22 ^a
Married	87%	13	100%	176	
Follow Politics					
Very Closely	88%	12	100%	75	.20 ^{bc}
Somewhat Cl.	82%	18	100%	140	
Not Very Cl.	61%	39	100%	40	
Republican	84%	16	100%	129	.10
Democrat	78%	22	100%	102	
Other	69%	31	100%	19	
White	81%	19	100%	220	.04
Hispanic	76%	24	100%	14	
Other	84%	26	100%	21	
Rely primarily on					
Newspapers	90%	10	100%	101	.21 ^a
Television	74%	16	100%	130	

Cramer's V used to calculate correlations between one nominal and one ordinal variable. Spearman's rho used to calculate correlations between two ordinal level variables.

- ^a T-test shows significant relationship ($p < .05$) between first and second rows of variable when compared to voting behavior.
- ^b T-test shows significant relationship ($p < .05$) between first and third rows of variable when compared to voting behavior
- ^c T-test shows significant relationship ($p < .05$) between second and third rows of variable when compared to voting behavior

for campaign information across almost all categories. Whether one was a high school graduate or college graduate, a member of the MTV generation or the Medicare generation, a Republican or a Democrat, television was the most used medium. The traditional assumption that television is used primarily by lower socio-economic status groups, while newspapers are used by higher SES groups, received little support.

The one category in which a statistically significant difference emerged was in the political interest of a voter ($C = .27, p < .05$). Respondents who followed politics very closely preferred newspapers to television by a 59-41 percent margin. The relationship was reversed for those who followed politics "somewhat" (television was preferred 56-44 percent) and for those who followed politics not very closely (television was preferred 84-16 percent). The strong relationship between media use and political interest held, independent of education level. However the direction of the relationship was unclear: although newspaper use could have generated a stronger interest in political campaigns, it is also possible that a voter's strong interest in politics may have led to reliance on newspapers. (There were no significant differences in media use based on which candidate a voter supported. Less than 1 percent of the voters said they switched candidates from November to February, preventing analysis of that variable.)

The study then looked at the relationship between voters' characteristics and their decision on whether to cast a ballot (Table 2). The highest correlations found were between media choice and voting ($C = .21, p < .05$). Of newspaper users, 90 percent reported voting in both elections, compared to 74 percent of television users saying they voted twice. Even when controlling for education and political interest, the relationship between newspaper use and higher voting levels remained consistent. Arizonans who relied on newspapers as their primary source of campaign news were significantly more likely to have voted in the two elections than those voters who relied primarily on television.

Another significant correlate with voting was political interest ($C = .20, p < .05$). Voters with an interest in politics were far more likely to have voted twice than those who followed the campaign not very closely. Education and marital status also were significantly related to turnout; those with higher education levels and those who are married were more likely to have voted twice. In summary, voters who relied on newspapers for campaign information, those who displayed some political interest or had some college education, and those who were married all were significantly more likely to have voted in the two elections than their counterparts.

A strong relationship also was found between voting and daily media use for both the Arizona and NES samples (Table 3). Sixty percent of the confirmed NES voters and 78 percent of Arizona voters said they watched television news seven days a week; only 18 percent of NES voters and 8 percent of Arizona voters watched TV news fewer than three times a week. A similar relationship existed for newspaper use. Almost half of the confirmed NES voters and 68 percent of Arizona voters reported reading a newspaper seven days a week; less than a third of the voters in each sample read newspapers fewer than three days a week.

Although media usage patterns appeared similar in the state-level and national races, Chi-square tests did not find the relationship to be significant ($p >$

Table 3

News media use per week,
1988 national sample vs. 1990-91 Arizona sample

TV Usage:	All 7 days	3-6 days	0-2 days	TOTAL	(n)
NES voters	60%	22	18	100%	1233
Arizona voters	78%	13	8	100%	206

$\chi^2 = 67.1$ with 2df ($p > .05$)

Newspaper usage:	All 7 days	3-6 days	0-2 days	TOTAL	(n)
NES voters	49%	19	32	100%	1234
Arizona voters	68%	15	18	100%	206

$\chi^2 = 53.6$ with 2df ($p > .05$)

NES voters represent those respondents in the national survey who reported casting a ballot in the 1988 election. Media use is based on their self reports of usage in the preceding week.

Arizona voters represent those respondents in the state survey who reported casting a ballot in both the general and runoff election in 1990-91. Media use is based on their self reports of usage during the campaign season.

.05). Arizona voters were more likely to read newspapers on a daily basis than their national counterparts, perhaps because of the tendency of voters to rely more on newspaper coverage for state and local races and on television for national races (Adams, 1981; Faber, Reese & Steeves, 1985).

Discussion

This study underscores the emergence of television in the governor's race as the primary news source for all levels of the Arizona electorate. Reliance on television news for campaign information cut across education levels, geographic areas, age groups, gender, marital status, racial groups and political parties. The type of television news viewed by different groups may vary, as this study made no attempt to distinguish *Meet the Press* type shows from the 11 o'clock newscast (or even *A Current Affair*). But while some college graduates may bemoan society's overreliance on TV, three out of five of the college graduates in this study cited television as their primary source of information.

The impact of political interest on media use and turnout also appeared to be very important. Voters who follow politics closely were the only subgroup to strongly prefer newspaper coverage to television coverage for campaign news. As political interest waned, so did reliance on newspapers. Although newspapers

remained a strong secondary source for almost all groups in this state-level campaign, the dominance of television may have been even greater if this study focused on a presidential race where television use is heavier (Adams, 1981; Faber, Reese & Steeves, 1985).

Although newspapers may be a secondary source, the study suggests that voters who relied on newspapers for information about a specific campaign were more likely to vote in that campaign than television users. Further work needs to be done to better understand the role of potential intervening variables found here, such as political interest, education and marital status, that may affect the relationship.

The direction of the relationship between media use and political interest remains unclear. Relying on television for campaign information could lead to lower political interest because of evidence of the medium's muting of differences between candidates (Clark & Fredin, 1978; Wagner, 1983) and weakening of voter understanding about partisan candidates (Patterson, 1980). However, political interest also may dictate media use. Voters with low political interest might seek out television news because of the more entertaining emphasis on the horse race aspects of a campaign (Keeter, 1987), the more personalized coverage (Shaffer, 1981) and the ease of watching it in their home without having to purchase a newspaper.

The Arizona and NES databases both show that voters were more likely to use the news media on a daily basis than infrequently. But the comparison of a state-level database and a different national level database complicates any comparison. The authors currently are analyzing data from the 1992 election in Arizona in which a single sample describes how it obtains information on the presidential election, state-level elections and local races. Such an approach can better identify whether reliance on television as the dominant source for news depends on the level of the political campaign. Independent checking of voter records instead of relying on respondent self-identification also would greatly reduce inflated turnout numbers.

Television news has the capacity to provide visually arresting coverage of political campaigns and to reach a broader cross-section of the electorate. But the passive nature of viewing television can lead to a failure to engage a viewer who might be casually watching TV news while having dinner or playing with the children. Following a campaign in a newspaper is often a more active process; one usually must purchase the newspaper, then seek out the campaign coverage amid all the other stories.

The continued availability of newspapers and the evolution of newspaper formats also may become significant questions for voting researchers. From 1950 to 1990 the number of daily newspapers published in the United States decreased from 1,772 to 1,611 (Editor & Publisher, 1992). Meanwhile, between 1959 and 1990, the percentage of Americans who relied on newspapers as their primary source of information dropped from 57 percent to 43 percent; the percentage who relied on television rose from 51 percent to 69 percent (Roper, 1991). Many of the remaining papers have sought to improve their financial health by imitating some of the features that can make television a more user-friendly medium: color pictures, splashy layouts, shorter stories, less hard news and more service features. If newspapers contribute to higher turnout levels because of their more extensive political coverage and their greater cognitive

demands on users, then the move to a softer, more visual newspaper format might have negative implications for election turnout. Conversely, the availability of video-text services, in which comprehensive political information can be read from a video screen, could suggest a new way to better engage those who prefer electronic presentation.

Although this micro-level attitudinal study is different than the 20-year NES study conducted by Teixeira (1987), the implications are consistent. The societal and economic forces that have contributed to reduced newspaper use, such as reduced reading in general, also might be contributing to reduced turnout. In revisiting the issues of media choice and voting turnout, this study found evidence that Arizonans who relied on television for their campaign information in the 1990-91 governor's race were less likely to have voted twice than their counterparts who read campaign stories over a morning cup of coffee. Given the gradual decline in voter turnout in American elections, the parallel drop in newspaper readership in the United States deserves further scrutiny by all who are interested in promoting an active citizenry.

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