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Writing Sample

As a communications student enrolled in the University of Connecticut's COMM 2300: Effects of Mass Media class I wrote a research paper about a political communications study conducted by Sabine Green and Linda Bos. The assignment was to give an outline/summary of the research project, discuss strengths/limits of the study, and connect it to an example from my life.

This sample was written on October 5th, 2024 and uses information and analysis that is accurate to the time prior to the 2024 election results being known.

The article "Priming Issues, Party Visibility, and Party Evaluations: The Impact on Vote Switching" by Sabine Green and Linda Bos studies how exposure to political parties in the news, parties perceived "owned issues", and exposure to favorable news about a party impact voter volatility. They draw conclusions and explore these outcomes based on agenda setting, issue ownership theory, and affective priming. These concepts and the research of their impact have paved the way for these researchers to create three hypotheses, and collect data regarding an individual's exposure to media, and voting decisions on a microlevel.

The first hypothesis states that "Exposure to a party's owned issue increases switching to that party" (Geers & Bos 2017) which was derived from the idea of issue ownership theory. Issue ownership theory explains that citizens will vote for the party they consider to be the owner (owner, meaning the party dealing with the issue most) of the issue most important to them. In this study they test how the presence of different issues in the news are perceived, and how that affects vote switching at the micro level. The second hypothesis states that "Exposure to news about a party increases switching to that party" (Geers & Bos 2017) which comes from the idea of agenda setting, saying that the media decides which party is most present in the news. They are claiming that when a party has a specific amount of visibility within the media, it begins to come across as the best option. This study looks at this implicitly, based on the attention that each outlet receives by the individual. The third hypothesis states "Exposure to favorable news about a party increases switching to that party" (Geers & Bos 2017) which corresponds to the idea of affective priming, or the outcome of a person's behavior after being influenced by a particular stimulus. Since the evaluation of a party is highly correlated to whether or not someone votes for that party, this was also tested implicitly based on what the media outlets were showcasing to an individual. These three hypotheses were collected from a Dutch study, where quantitative data was collected leading up to a large election in order to analyze and draw conclusions to test these hypotheses.

A panel data survey was sent out to 2,250 respondents from the University of Amsterdam. This survey required four waves of collection, and only respondents that completed all four waves were included. This brought the sample size to 765 university students as participants, they did not specify gender, age, race, or any other demographic information. The study was collected via TNS NIPO and *de Volksrant*, a Dutch newspaper that uses "computer assisted self interviewing" (Geers & Bos 2017).

Participants received a survey where they indicated which party they would vote for that day, and at the end who they ended up voting for. They were also asked about their exposure to different media outlets, and were asked to indicate how often they read or watched that program. Those responses were rated from 0 (never) to 4 (daily). They were also given a list of issues, and asked to identify which party had the best solution for each issue. Party evaluations, different media outlets, issues that were mentioned, and party visibility were coded and analyzed in a content analysis.

The findings resulted from the second two waves of the study, as the study aimed to look at the change in voting based on the media, and the media's campaign did not start until after the 2nd wave. Out of the 765 participants 66% remained loyal to the same party, 24% switched, and 10% did not show up to vote on election day. The researchers created three tables to showcase their data. Table 1 represented the number of times each issue was mentioned in each of the media outlets. Essentially, they listed nine of the most pressing societal issues (ie. employment, immigration, safety, etc.) and counted how many times those issues came up in sixteen different media outlets. They concluded that the European Union and healthcare gets the most overall attention, whereas environmental issues and immigration get the least coverage. Table 2 represented how favorably/unfavorably each party is valued in each news source. The average value of the party evaluation was calculated from -1 to 1 (where -1 is unfavorable and 1 is favorable) and assigned to each news source. This table concluded that democrats are most positively represented, but that in general all parties are represented negatively. Table 3 displayed how often each party gets coverage on different news sites. This concluded that someone's exposure to a party depends on which outlet they watch. Table 4 showcased voter perceptions on issue ownership by showing a percentage of people who attribute different societal issues to different political parties. This data concluded that there is no general agreement about issue ownership on most issues, with an exception for the green party owning the environmental issues. Table 5 represented the effects of different issues, party visibility, and party evaluations in the news on how likely someone is to change their vote. Each column showcases the logistical regression and the strength of relationship between the person and if their vote would change; the first column showed the likelihood of a person changing their vote, the second adds the factor of visibility of issues news, the third adds the possibility of party evaluations and then party visibility. P tests were run to show that these correlations are statistically significant, or that these events did not happen by chance. Calculations for each table were derived from a formula that took into account exposure to issues in the news, amount of exposure to news in general, and which medium the news information was being derived from.

After collecting this data, an analysis of variance was conducted by creating a model of marginal effects that showed the participants' socio demographic information and their likelihood to change their vote. The models drawn showcased a marginal effects plot. The line that was drawn down the middle of the graph represented the estimated marginal effect (or predicted values) showing a relationship between the independent variable (party visibility, party evaluations, etc.) and the probability of someone changing their vote. The lines above and below the central line were drawn to illustrate a range of uncertainty or a gap of unexplained variance. The smaller this gap was, the closer the confidence interval lines were to the predicted values, meaning it was more likely that the independent variable was causing this change in voting behavior. The first model that just showed the participants did not show a high correlation, and there was a wide gap of unexplained variance, rejecting the null hypothesis. When a second model was drawn, it included party visibility and how often issues were in the news. This caused a significant change, and created a very small gap of unexplained variance leading us to conclude that there is a significant positive effect of issue news on vote switching. This confirmed the first and second

hypotheses. A third model was drawn which included party evaluations and party visibility. This showed positive coverage of a party has the closest correlation to changing votes, as the gap of unexplained variance was very small. This proved the third hypothesis to also be true. The ability to prove these hypotheses to be true allowed for a few main conclusions to be drawn regarding the impact of media exposure, issue news, and issue ownership to voter volatility. The first being that if a voter sees an issue in the media often, and they see it being portrayed positively by a specific party, they are more likely to switch to voting for that party. The results also further confirm the theory that issue ownership plays an underlying role in vote switching.

These conclusions apply to anyone who is a part of a society or scenario where they can vote for an outcome. The United States is nearing a very big election, and the topic of influencing public opinion with the media has taken a spotlight during this election season. As this study found, the exposure to favorable coverage about a certain party primed viewers to think a certain way about them, and therefore influenced the chance that they change their voting decision. It also found that party visibility, and the agenda set by the media that decides what we think about increases the likelihood for people to switch their vote. "...evaluations can function as a heuristic that gives voters an indication on whether to evaluate a party positively or negatively and whether to vote for that party" (Geers & Bos 2017) They go on to conclude that journalists have major control over the outcomes of an election, and play a critical role in influencing the public's decisions. Because people often don't want to do the work to learn and understand issues in the media, they will agree with the evaluations of journalists as a shortcut to doing their own research, thus giving them immense power to sway public opinion. This study also concludes that campaigning and having an effective campaign technique that increases your presence in the media will affect your successes. Each of these ideas can be translated to just about any issue in our world. Our perspectives are shaped by the things around us, and the media is just one of the many things that primes us to think the way that we think. While the conclusions of this study apply to just about any person living in a society that involves voting, these conclusions and theories expand past that realm and dive into the power of journalists and the press. The press is an essential part of democracy, and an essential part to a free society. Access to information, and information that is accurate and unbiased should be a basic human right, and is something we must continue to advocate for and provide during a time where the spread of fake news/misinformation is becoming more and more prominent.

A strength of this study is that it goes beyond the idea of studying the effects of mass media on a large scale, and dove into the microlevel. Additionally, due to the format of this study and how the voting preference was surveyed in waves, we can conclude that the party evaluations were affecting voting behavior, rather than voting behavior affecting how parties are portrayed in the news. A limit or cause for error of the study was that there was an overlap of how issue news and evaluative news was measured, which means that the effect of issue news while there, could be overestimated. This data also limited the ability to test the extent to which evaluative tone in the media relates to the issues being discussed. However, this opens up further investigation into an experimental study where each of the elements of this study are tested independently with and without the other. For example, how evaluative news being present or not present affects someone's voting decision. This would help to support the idea that the media and the world around us is always changing our perspective, and that these principles can be applied everyday.

The media definitely plays a huge role in my life, and most of my media consumption relates to political content. I am a part of UConn's Human Rights and Action Learning Community, most of my friends are political science majors, and I am hoping to work for a nonprofit social justice organization or

in politics/government doing media related work in the future. I chose this study because of how impactful I have noticed the media to be on my political opinions, and in the future I want to be able to use it as a tool to create positive change. An example of how recent media has played a role in my life is from the recent presidential debates. Prior to Kamala Harris being the democratic nominee, Joe Biden engaged in a debate with Donald Trump. This debate caught a lot of attention from the citizens of America and many were claiming that Donald Trump was “more coherent” during the debate. However, when Donald Trump debated Kamala Harris during this past presidential debate, many scholarly sources showed that it was clear that Kamala Harris won the debate, and the polls began to swing in her direction. I have witnessed a large number of voters switch their indicated vote after watching Kamala Harris debate rather than Joe Biden. While I was planning on voting in the democratic party from the beginning and the debate did not change my opinion, this media was highly influential for many members of our society. It opened up the eyes of many uninformed voters and led to an increase of people who were registered to vote.

This study showcased thorough research regarding the impact of the media on voter volatility. The article “Priming Issues, Party Visibility, and Party Evaluations: The Impact on Vote Switching” by Sabine Green and Linda Bos studies how exposure to political parties in the news, their perceived “owned issues”, and exposure to favorable news about a party impact voter volatility. They draw conclusions and explore these outcomes based on agenda setting, issue ownership theory, and priming. The hypotheses that exposure to a party's owned issues, exposure to news about a party, and exposure to favorable news about a party increases switching to that party was supported, and conclusions were drawn with the use of agenda setting theory, priming, and issue ownership theory. When considering who to vote for in an upcoming election, consider looking into many different news sources and fact checking the information that is being spread. Note that party and issue exposure or lack thereof doesn't mean that something is more or not as important, and have a well rounded understanding before deciding which candidate would be the best option for running our country.

References:

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