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The Effect of Political Advertising on Perceived Bias and Credibility
of Online News Stories

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Communication
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

by
S. Mariam Ayad
May 2013

Dr. Robert Andrew Dunn, Committee Chair

Dr. Stephen Marshall

Dr. Carrie Oliveira

Keywords: online news, news credibility, news bias, context effects, political advertising

ABSTRACT

The Effect of Political Advertising on Perceived Bias and Credibility of Online News Stories

by

S. Mariam Ayad

This study was an investigation of the effect of political advertising on readers' perceived bias and credibility of an online news article based on participants' political leanings. Media priming and the hostile media effect were the theoretical underpinnings. Participants were asked to read an unbiased news article placed alongside 3 advertisements. Participants were put into 1 of 3 conditions — right-leaning advertisements, left-leaning advertisements, or neutral advertisements. They then answered questions about the perceived bias and credibility of the article and their own political affiliation. The researchers hypothesized that left-leaning individuals would perceive the article with right-leaning advertisements as biased and less credible and the opposite would be true of right-leaning individuals. Results were not consistent with hypotheses but trended in the expected directions.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband Ayad. Without your support and encouragement I would never have accomplished this task. Thank you for continuing to give me the courage to follow my dreams.

I also dedicate this study to my parents Habib and Seema Ahmed and my brother Naveed. The faith that you've always had in me and the constant push to aim higher has brought me further than I ever dreamed possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Role of Online News in Political Polarization

Internet use in the United States has continued to increase over the last 2 decades (Pew Internet & American Life Project [PIALP], 2012a). Because of its ease of use and few regulations, the Internet has allowed the number of news sources to flourish (Morris, 2007). Most American adults have used the Internet to check the news, and provided an audience for the continually increasing number of news outlets (Morris, 2007; PIALP, 2012c). Although television news is still the most popular among news consumers, the Internet is quickly gaining (Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2012b). The Internet surpassed print publications as a popular news source in 2010. On a typical day, almost half of adult Internet users read or watch online news (PIALP, 2012b). But as the number of online news outlets has increased, so has the fragmentation of the news media (Morris, 2007).

Niche websites have started to attract news consumers and steer them away from mainstream sources (Morris, 2007). The number of people that access these niche sites has increased as the Internet has become a popular source of information (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Most news blogs and sites that cater to niche audiences are split by political ideology. Although their audiences are small, niche news sites that provide one-sided political coverage, such as DailyKos.com on the left and FreeRepublic.com on the right, have developed a loyal following. This fragmented news environment has given Americans the ability to choose from a variety of sources to seek political information

and news (Morris, 2007). Research has shown that those who feel like they do not receive information from mainstream sources that confirm their point of view seek out other news outlets online (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006). The Internet boasts many news outlet options, but given a choice of what to read, people tend to choose news items that reinforce their own opinions rather than material that challenges their beliefs (Garrett, 2009).

This trend in news consumption has led to a more politically polarized public (Morris, 2007). A study by Coe et al. (2008) showed that television viewership is divided along partisan lines. The researchers found that liberals were more likely to report viewing the liberally-aligned *The Daily Show* than more conservative Fox News. Part of what motivates people to watch certain news programs is the tendency of those shows to present "a relatively partisan view of current events" (Coe et al., 2008, p. 209). The study found that audience appreciation of a news program that shared their point of view was a significant predictor of whether they chose to watch it.

Not only are people more likely to watch programs that reinforce their beliefs, but they also rate those programs as less biased (Coe et al., 2008). Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy (2012) found that people who viewed television news that agreed with their political attitudes rated the shows as more fair, friendly, good, and cooperative than those who saw shows countering their political attitudes. Participants who watched counter-attitudinal shows were also more likely to find the shows uninformative, unbalanced, and less American than those who watched the proattitudinal show. Another study found that the liberal-leaning program, *The Daily Show*, was rated significantly more biased by

conservatives and Fox News, a conservative news channel, was rated significantly more biased by liberals (Coe et al., 2008).

Despite the proliferation of niche news media online, mainstream news outlets, such as CNN, ABC, and NYTimes.com, remain the most popular on the web (Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2012a). The political approach of major news outlets is different, however. Most mainstream news organizations attempt to present news in an objective way, using multiple sources, and attempt a balanced perspective (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996). Some of these sources, including CNN and Reuters, have received more neutral evaluations by both liberals and conservatives (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Coe et al., 2008). Despite these ratings, the mainstream media is still suffering from a distrusting public (Greer, 2003).

Research has shown that consumers' perceptions of a media organization's political ideology have a significant impact on which news medium they prefer (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996). This means that a cue to a news website's political leaning can influence how a news consumer interprets the source's beliefs and the news content's bent. Because news organizations accept money from advertisers to place ad content, ads are one way that consumers gauge the political leaning of a news publication and its website (Saba, 2010). Political advertising in particular can be perceived as indicative of news organization's support of a party, candidate, or issue. As increasing numbers of news consumers flock to the Internet to consume news, political ads rather than news content might play an increasingly influential role in readers' perceptions of credibility and bias.

Online News Bias

Bias and objectivity speak to the credibility of an article because in most instances, the credibility of a news story is determined by the level of objectivity it exhibits (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996; Sundar, 1999). A study by Fico, Richardson, and Edwards (2004) found the level of balanced coverage predicted the level of perceived story bias. They found that when presented with a balanced and imbalanced article, readers perceived the imbalanced stories as biased. Readers also evaluated the newspapers publishing the imbalanced articles as less credible. The imbalanced story structure was a significant predictor of perceived story bias. This study suggests that readers will evaluate articles they perceive as favoring one side of an issue as less credible.

Online news in particular is perceived differently by consumers and receives different credibility ratings from newspapers or television news. Consumers of online news sources, such as like CNN.com and Time Online, placed an additional emphasis on bias and objectivity (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2002). These two factors were more important to consumers when they considered online news versus print or TV news. This study does not stand alone. Researchers have found time and again that the Internet elicits unique responses from Web users. In a study about the credibility of information on Congressional candidates, Brady (1996) found that participants judged the Internet as more credible than a televised version of the same information. The Pew Research Center for the People and Press obtained a similar finding as early as 1996. Significantly more Web users indicated they felt they were “more likely to find accurate information about what’s going on in the world on the Internet than in the daily

newspapers or on the network news” (Pew Research Center, 1996, p. 56). In a study that surveyed politically-interested Web users, Johnson and Kaye (1998) found that consumers of political news and information judged the online version of a news organization as more credible than the print version of the same media organization. This research shows that the Internet is becoming the medium that consumers are relying on most to gather their news.

Most news organizations realize that objective reporting is a worthwhile investment (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996). Reader perceptions of story credibility are important for the news organization's image. Because many studies have found that as the public's perception of media credibility increases so does media consumption, perceived credibility is key to gaining readers and increasing profits (Rimmer & Weaver, 1987).

Yet, overall perceived media credibility is on the decline (Greer, 2003). The news media has seen its credibility ratings spiral downward since the mid-1980s. Reader perceptions of story credibility are important for a newspaper's image. Slater and Rouner (1996) argued that readers use source credentials and the message itself to evaluate credibility, and that “audience evaluation of message content has a great deal more to do with source credibility judgments and subsequent belief change than previously assumed” (p. 975). Slater and Rouner also argued that "when confronted with a message, especially one from a source one knows nothing about other than source credentials, one would reasonably make inferences about that source's credibility based on the perceived quality of the message" (p. 975). If readers perceive an online article to be unfair, and therefore of lower quality, they might judge the entire website or news organization to be of low

quality as well. One of the keys to online news credibility lies in the study of context effects.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Context Effects

There is a fair amount of research exploring the interaction between media content and advertisements. These studies show a significant link between content context and interpretation. A study by Yi (1990a) found that the context of ads affects how persuasive they might be. The study looked at ads within magazine articles and found that the content of the magazine article affected how readers evaluated the ads on those pages. Readers who read the article related to safety were more likely to use this construct to evaluate the car ad, whereas those who read the article about oil were more likely to use fuel economy to evaluate the car ad. Other studies found similar context effects for television commercials. Perry, Jenzowsky, Hester, King, and Yi (1997) found that commercials that were more humorous actually enhanced viewer enjoyment of a funny TV show. Another study found that the inclusion of commercials affected how viewers perceived low- and high-quality news broadcasts (Perry, Trunnell, Ellis, & Kazoleas, 2009). The study found that the removal of commercials from a low-quality newscast led to a more negative emotional response toward the news broadcast. The removal of commercials from a high-quality newscast, however, led to a more positive emotional response.

The Internet has also been the subject of context effects research. Fogg et al. (2003) investigated the pieces of a website that users use to evaluate its credibility and found that the main content of the site is just a small piece of puzzle. Fogg et al. found

that many consumers notice advertising and use it to evaluate the credibility of a website. The exploratory study categorized comments on surveys filled out by more than 2,500 Web users on their evaluations of specific websites. On the issue of site credibility, the researchers found that advertising was mentioned, usually negatively, by about 13.8% of the participants. Although news sites were among the webpages that participants were asked to evaluate, the study did not break up the credibility comments by type of site.

Despite the proliferation of Internet use by news consumers, there have been only a few studies on the ways in which advertising shapes perceptions of online news. This is problematic as some researchers have expressed concern about the increasing importance of advertising revenue and of how it might blur the line between editorial and commercial content on news websites (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Yang & Oliver, 2004). Singer (2003) argues that “online media sites are integrating content that generates revenue from advertisers and marketers with content that ostensibly is intended to fulfill the professional obligation to provide information whose sole purpose is public service” (p. 154). Yang and Oliver (2004) found that the seriousness of online ads can affect how readers perceive the accompanying news article. They found that some Internet users perceived hard news stories paired with silly advertisements as having less news value and less credibility than hard news stories paired with serious ads or no ads. The researchers argued that if online news consumers perceive a serious news article as less newsworthy because it is paired with a humorous ad, “this may imply that the issues themselves are less important (Yang & Oliver, 2004, p. 745), a serious implication for a news outlet. Another study found a weak correlation between ad credibility and story credibility (Greer, 2003). Although most conditions showed some effect of ad credibility

on story credibility, only one condition was statistically significant — when a low-credibility ad was paired with a highly credible source. These studies provide some evidence that advertising placed next to an article can affect the article’s perceived credibility.

The most compelling evidence for ads to affect the perceived credibility of news articles comes from a study conducted by *The Seattle Times* (Saba, 2010). The newspaper placed a political ad for the state’s land commissioner next to an investigative article about landslides in Washington. In response, not only did the newsroom reporters object to the pairing, but the paper’s readers also responded negatively, wondering if the newsroom did it on purpose. This study was exploratory and was not performed in a controlled environment; reader reactions were also not analyzed quantitatively. However, the study did find that, overall, “too many contextual ads surrounding news stories ... made readers suspicious” (p. 20). The audience did not respond as severely when contextual ads were paired with soft news, such as entertainment or sports.

Priming

One theoretical framework that may explain context effects is media priming. Media priming refers to the “the effects of the content of media on people’s later behavior or judgments related to the content that was processed” (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009, p. 74). Research shows that online news users pay little attention to ads (Greer, 2003). Therefore, priming serves as an ideal theoretical basis for this study. In priming, even a subconscious glance at an ad can activate the brain and lead to conscious thoughts about surrounding content.

Priming has been used many times to explain how an advertisement's surrounding context affects ad evaluations. A study by Schmitt (1994) found that people who are primed to think about certain values apply those values as their framework when interpreting an ad. The study showed that "depending on the context, subjects assigned different interpretation to the same picture" (p. 7). A study by Yi (1990b) also demonstrated a similar result. Yi found that the advertising context affected how viewers evaluated the advertising brand. The study showed that the activation of a particular product attribute guided the participants' interpretation of the brand. The researcher concluded that adjacent materials have an effect on how users evaluated an ad. Another study found that ad context also primes how viewers interpret the ad itself, not just its brand (Yi, 1990a). Yi found that "the ad context is not merely a benign background for ads, but it can also become an effective communication itself" (p. 47).

Advertising on news sites placed adjacent to the news articles might play a similar role in readers' evaluation of the news article or news source. This is especially true of political advertising because of increasing party polarization (Morris, 2007).

CHAPTER 3
ONLINE ADVERTISING

Political Advertising

Research on political advertisements has shown that Internet ads elicit a different response from consumers than other campaign materials. Although few studies have explored the differences of advertising effects based on Internet versus traditional media, there is some evidence in political science research for differences in consumer response based on medium (Kaid, 2002; McKinney & Gaddie, 2000). For example, McKinney and Gaddie (2000) found that viewers who watched a New Hampshire primary debate online learned much more about the issues than those who watched the debate on television. In another study, Kaid (2002) found that leading up to the 2000 presidential election, undecided voters who were exposed to online advertising changed their vote to Gore, whereas those exposed to the same videos on television changed their votes to Bush. This research provides evidence that the Internet is a unique advertising platform that elicits a different response from consumers than traditional media.

The Internet also affords new hurdles for advertisers. Although the number of individuals using the Internet has increased, research shows that online ad click rates have declined in recent years (Cho & Cheon, 2004). The trend for consumers to avoid online ads has been demonstrated further by the “banner blindness” phenomenon in which Internet users “avoid fixing their eyes on anything that looks like a banner ad” (Cho & Cheon, 2004, p. 89). Although advertising avoidance is seen in traditional media as well, Cho and Cheon argue that online advertising avoidance is unique in three ways.

Firstly, online ads are many times perceived to be a barrier in reaching goals. People still use the Internet primarily for information-seeking tasks. Because ads get in the way of those tasks, ads are avoided more vigorously. Secondly, a unique feature of the Internet is the concern with download time of Websites. Because ads can cause an increase in download time and hence the speed of access to content, they are more likely to be perceived negatively than traditional ads. In this way, ad clutter takes on an additional negative quality on the Internet. Finally, the interactivity of the Internet, such as the need for consumers to click on ads in order to see additional content, makes online ads less likely to be observed.

Despite this trend, the use of online political advertising has continued to increase in presidential election campaigns since the late 1990s (Kaid, 2002). After the 1996 election, campaign professionals began to realize the potential of the Internet to reach voters (Connell, 1997). Registered voters take note of online campaign information from a variety of sources, including the campaign materials themselves (Smith & Duggan, 2012). Research on the 2012 presidential election showed that 55% of registered voters viewed political videos online and 36% of registered voters reported watching specifically political advertisements online. The effect of political advertising on consumers has generally followed a direct effects perspective in which the ad transfers information to the consumer (Kaid, 2002). In this sense it can serve as perfect prime for news consumers.

Just as with news sources, individuals engage in selective exposure when it comes to political ads (Chang, 2003). Consumers reinforce their existing beliefs upon exposure to ad information from either political party. Ads by candidates consumers support are

favored over ads by candidates with opposing viewpoints. Overall, though, consumers see political advertising as lacking credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Johnson and Kaye found that political candidate flyers and websites were not viewed as credible by politically-interested Web users. Online political ads, which carry the same messages in the same ways as on candidate websites, most likely have a similar effect on consumers. It is possible that this distrust of candidate material translates to the news article placed next to candidate ads through priming. In other words, political ads on a news webpage could influence readers' perception of the news article itself.

Hypotheses

Based on literature on priming theory, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Participants will perceive a news article surrounded by conservative ads as biased toward conservatives.

H1b: Participants will perceive a news article surrounded by liberal ads as biased toward liberals.

H1c: Participants will perceive an online news source with partisan ads as showing more favor toward a political party than a news source with nonpartisan ads.

Because increased bias is closely linked to decreased credibility and news value, the following hypotheses are proposed (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996; Sundar, 1999; Yang & Oliver, 2004).

H2: Participants will perceive a news article surrounded by partisan ads as less credible than a news article featuring nonpartisan advertising.

H3: Participants will perceive a news article surrounded by partisan ads as having less news value than a news article featuring nonpartisan advertising.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AFFILIATION

Political Affiliation

News consumers do not come online with a clean slate, however. They have biases of their own. In the case of a political advertising prime and an increasingly polarized public, a reader's political affiliation is an important consideration. Research shows that political affiliation is a deciding factor in which news media Americans choose to consume (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

The gap between Republican and Democratic news consumers' assessment of media bias has continued to increase since 2002 (Pew Research Center, 2012). The Pew Research Center (2012) looked at evaluations of news bias for news organizations rather than for a specific medium; therefore, these findings can extend to online content for major news organizations. Robinson and Kohut (1988) also found that the party identification of consumers was, although weakly, statistically significant in relation to network believability, with Republicans being more critical of the media than Democrats. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) also found that news source is an important indicator for readers. They found that there was a significant difference between the media sources that conservatives and liberals consume for hard and soft news. Furthermore, there was a larger divide for hard news stories such as politics and foreign policy. This trend is more obvious in other countries, like Britain, where most newspapers have "clearly perceived partisan biases" (Endersby, 2011, p. 1). Endersby found that British news consumers read newspapers that align with their own political ideology. Similarly, other researchers have

found that partisan news programs are appealing to the American public as well (Coe et al., 2008). American news consumers who watch partisan news programs that align with their own beliefs find those shows to be more informative and interesting than content that contradicts their views (Coe et al., 2008). This research shows that political affiliation has an effect on what news sources consumers seek out.

In the U.S. cues about political leaning from news sources are subtler than in Britain. Many studies have found that while Republicans judge overall news media coverage as too liberal, Democrats judge that same coverage as too conservative (Gunther, 1992). Gunther found that Republicans judged print and TV news media coverage as more favorable to Democrats. He also found that Democrats similarly saw media coverage as positively biased toward Republicans. Based on these and other results from his study, Gunther was able to conclude that group membership, such as political affiliation, has an effect on a person's perception of fairness or credibility of the mass media. Many times this phenomenon takes the form of the hostile media effect (HME).

Hostile Media Effect

According to HME consumers perceive media coverage as contrary to their own point-of-view. In the seminal study on hostile media theory, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) showed the same news coverage of the Middle East conflict to Israeli and Palestinian students. They found that both groups believed the news coverage to be biased toward the other side. Other researchers have argued that, in a similar vein, Republicans and Democrats view the same coverage as biased in favor of the other (Gunther, 1992; Morris, 2007). An analysis of Pew Research Center survey data by Morris (2007) showed that Democrats were more likely to see a conservative bias in the

mainstream media, and Republicans were likely to see a liberal bias. Both groups were less likely to see media bias in news coverage that favored their beliefs.

Although Vallone, Ross, and Leper (1985) argued that the hostile media effect could only be studied using highly-involved partisan participants, Gunther and Chia (2001) found support for a relative HME. The relative hostile media effect occurs when "each group perceives news coverage to be either more hostile to, or at least less agreeable with, their own point of view than the opposing group sees it" (Gunther & Chia, 2001, p. 690). This type of definition allows for less complexity in research design while still showing a hostile media effect because it does not require that the news coverage be completely neutral or for all participants to be highly involved in the issue. In their study of about 400 randomly-selected national survey respondents, Gunther and Chia found solid evidence for a relative hostile media effect. Their survey asked questions about research using primates. Although the majority of participants believed the news coverage to be biased against primate research, those who had expressed support of such research saw the news coverage as significantly more biased.

Arpan and Raney (2003) found that the relative hostile media effect occurred among sports fans and that their perception of the source might have contributed to their perceptions of media bias. They found that participants rated an article as less biased against their team when it was printed in their hometown paper than when it was printed in the rival town's newspaper. This provides additional evidence that media consumers' expectations of the media source affect their evaluations of its relative bias. Political advertising is one way in which consumers might create expectations of the media source, affecting their perceptions of story bias.

Hypotheses

Based on priming and HME, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Liberally-aligned participants will perceive a news article featuring conservative ads as more biased against liberals than will conservatively-aligned participants.

H4b: Conservatively-aligned participants will perceive a news article featuring liberal ads as more biased against conservatives than will liberally-aligned participants.

H4c: Liberally-aligned participants will perceive an online news source featuring conservative ads as favoring the Republican Party more than conservatively-aligned participants.

Because increased bias is closely linked to decreased credibility and news value, the following hypotheses are proposed (Ognianova & Endersby, 1996; Sundar, 1999; Yang & Oliver, 2004).

H5: Participants will perceive a news article as less credible if the ads on the page do not align with their own political affiliation.

H6: Participants will perceive a news article as having less news value if the ads on the page do not align with their own political affiliation.

CHAPTER 5

OTHER VARIABLES OF INTEREST

Gunther (1992) argued that audiences do not attribute news credibility to only a source or channel, but rather that perceived credibility is a “highly situational assessment” (p. 149). For example, reader demographics, how controversial the article topic, and the article’s surrounding content can all affect perceived article credibility.

Gender

Studies that investigate the correlation of demographic variables and the perception of media credibility have consistently found that gender is a significant predictor (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Perry et al., 2009; Robinson & Kohut, 1988). In a study about the interaction between media believability and a number of demographic variables, Robinson and Kohut (1988) found that gender was the most significant predictor of attitudes towards the press. The correlation was most powerful in network believability for which men were much more likely than women to be critical of the media. Ten years later Johnson and Kaye (1998) found the same result. Gender was the only variable that was significantly related to credibility of all four online sources in the study, with women finding the Internet as more credible and trustworthy than men. Perry et al. (2009) found that gender played a role in how much TV ad quality and ad presence affected the participants’ perceptions on TV news. The study found that women were significantly more likely to perceive news broadcasts as happy when shown with high-quality commercials as opposed to low-quality commercials. On the other hand, men reported higher levels of happiness when viewing news broadcasts alongside low-

quality commercials. In the absence of advertisements, men perceived the news broadcasts to be more bold, strong, dark, and hard, whereas women perceived those broadcasts to be more timid, weak, light, and soft.

RQ1: Is there a difference between men's and women's perceptions of political bias, credibility and new value in news articles featuring political advertising?

Level of Political Activity

Studies have shown that the level of political involvement or interest of the consumer affects how they evaluate news sources. Johnson and Kaye (2000) found that those who show campaign interest believed online newspapers to be more credible than those who were not interested in campaigns. Thus, the following hypothesis is posed.

H7: Participants who engage in more political activity will find the article more credible than those who are less politically active.

Internet Use

Research has shown that as people spend more time online, they rate online newspaper stories higher in credibility (Greer, 2003; Nozato, 2002). This is because as people use a medium more, they come to rely on it and find it more credible (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Over time consumers tend to find their preferred medium or the one they rely on the most as more credible (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). Specifically, Johnson and Kaye (2000) found that those who rely more on the Web for information believed online newspapers to be more credible.

H8: Participants who use the Internet more will rate the article as more credible.

Prior Knowledge

Research has shown that prior knowledge of content can have an effect on perceived credibility of a source. A study by Eastin (2001) showed that previous knowledge on an issue led to a perception of higher credibility when reading about that issue online. Participants filled out a questionnaire about a health topic before reading about it online. Those who were more knowledgeable about the topic according to the pretest found the online message on the topic to be more credible than those who did not know much about the health topic beforehand. This shows that those with higher prior knowledge about a topic will perceive an article about that topic as more credible. Because this study is about political news, it stands to reason that in the context of this study, prior knowledge refers to knowledge about politics.

H9: Participants with prior knowledge about political issues will perceive the news article to be more credible than those without political knowledge.

Previous literature also shows that prior knowledge of news increases reader interest because they already have a foundation of information on which to build (Eilders, 2006). This interest leads them to perceive the material to be more newsworthy (Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H10: Participants with prior knowledge about political issues will perceive the news article to have more news value than those without political knowledge.

CHAPTER 6

METHOD

Participants

The 144 participants in this study were students from a medium-sized southeastern public university. Participants were recruited primarily from courses in the communication and psychology departments. Any student under the age of 18 was excluded from the study. The study recruited 52 males and 92 females.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. The researchers relied on students who had access to an online survey data collection system to volunteer to participate in the survey. Students who volunteered their participation read an informed consent document online before beginning the study. Respondents were offered a minimal amount of extra credit for their participation.

There were 43 conservatives, 45 liberals, 56 individuals who did not consider themselves aligned with either political leaning. More than half of participants, 75, used the Internet as their primary news source. The next most common sources were television (46), other (12), radio (6), and newspaper (5).

Research Design

The study was designed as a 3 (condition: conservative ads, liberal ads, nonpartisan ads) x 3 (participant's political affiliation: conservative, neutral, liberal) between-subjects factorial design.

The news article used as the stimulus for this study was an actual news article about the Electoral College. This article was used because the topic had the potential to

be perceived as partisan. A class of undergraduate students rated the article for its potential bias. The rater's tool consisted of the first 10 items on the full questionnaire for this study. Statistical analyses showed the article was perceived by the raters as unbiased and was therefore appropriate for use in this study (See Appendix B for the news article used in this study).

The political ads used for this study were created solely for purpose of this research. There were three sets of ads – conservative, liberal, and neutral. Each set comprised three ads with the following topics: the school system, the military, and voting. The three sets of ads created the three conditions: the article with conservative ads, the article with liberal ads, and the article with neutral ads. Every attempt was made to keep the overall look of the ads the same in the different conditions and altering only the message content and the ad sponsor (See Appendix C for all three ad designs and layouts).

The questionnaire collected information in the following categories: perceived political bias, article credibility, article news value, political affiliation, political activity, perception of media hostility, media consumption, political knowledge, and gender (See Appendix A for complete questionnaire). The survey results were recorded online.

To determine perceived political bias, the researchers adapted the news credibility scale developed by Arpan and Raney (2003). The 12 survey items asked respondents to rate the article, the reporter and the newspaper on bias. The article was rated on whether it was biased toward a political leaning, made a political leaning seem more or less likeable, or made a political leaning seem better or worse. The reporter and the newspaper were rated on whether they were biased toward a particular political leaning.

Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from -3 to +3. The first five questions asked about conservative leaning and were later combined into a single conservative bias scale. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the reliability of all scales. The conservative bias scale was a reliable measure ($\alpha=.89$). The next five questions asked about liberal leaning and were later combined into a single liberal bias scale ($\alpha=.89$). The final two items asked whether the reporter and newspaper favored a political party and were scaled from 7 to 1, from Democrat to Republican. These two items were later merged to form a single party favor scale ($\alpha=.77$).

To determine article credibility, the news credibility scale developed by Gaziano and McGrath (1986) was used. The scale asked participants to rank the article based on fairness, overall bias, completeness, accuracy, invasion of privacy, watching after reader interest, concern for community, separation of fact and opinion, trustworthiness, concern for public interest, whether it was factual or opinionated, and whether the reporters appeared well-trained. The 12 items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, numbered from 7 to 1. The second and fifth items were reverse-coded. The reliability coefficient for this scale was .90.

News value was measured using a scale adapted from D'Alessio (2003) and Sallot et al. (1998). The five items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, numbered from 7 to 1. The items aimed to capture how participants perceived the article's interest to readers, usefulness, completeness, timeliness, and grammatical accuracy. The reliability coefficient for this scale was .73.

The researchers created survey items to determine respondents' political affiliation, political activity, perception of media hostility, media consumption, and

political knowledge. Participants were asked to self-report their political affiliation on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from very conservative to very liberal. The scale was later recoded as a categorical variable, which was used to conduct a two-way ANOVA. Responses of 5, 6, and 7 were recoded as conservative and 1, 2, and 3 were recoded as liberal. The middle value of 4 was recoded as unaffiliated.

Political activity was measured by asking participants how many times they had participated in six different political activities. These included circulating a petition for a candidate or issue, contributing money to a social group or cause, working for a social group or cause, contributing money to a political party or campaign, and working for a political party or campaign. The responses were added up to give an aggregate amount of political activity. This single response item for political activity was treated as a scale. Because of high variance, the political activity scale was highly skewed (skewness=3.87; kurtosis=19.06).

To determine perceptions of media hostility, participants were asked one question about whether they agreed with a statement about whether the media were biased against their views. The response format was a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from definitely agree to definitely disagree. Participants' media consumption was determined by four multiple choice items. The first question asked for respondents' news medium of choice (newspaper, television, online, radio, or other). The next question asked how often they consumed news each week (every day, 4 to 6 days, 1 to 3 days, or less than 1 day). Next, they were asked the amount of time they spent consuming news each week (less than 1 hour, 1 to 5 hours, 5 to 10 hours, or more than 10 hours). The final media consumption question asked participants how often they use the Internet per week (less than 1 hour, 1

to 5 hours, 5 to 10 hours, or more than 10 hours). Political knowledge was determined by asking respondents whether they consider themselves up-to-date on political issues. The response format was a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "I stay current" to "I do not consume political news at all." Respondents self-reported their gender as male or female.

Procedure

Data were collected via an online survey data collection system, featuring the three conditions. Participants self-selected into a condition without knowing which condition they were choosing. Participants were not told which condition they were in, and they were only allowed to participate in one condition for the study. Each of the three conditions was labeled as a different precious stone or metal (platinum, diamond, and gold) to disguise the nature of the study and the condition. Participants could take the survey in any location and at any time during the dates the study was available. The number of participants in each condition was comparable. There were 44 participants in the control group, 53 in the conservative ad condition, and 47 in the liberal ad condition.

After entering the survey by clicking a button ensuring their consent, participants read a balanced news article with three ads situated on the page. Participants were not instructed to note the ads but only to read the article and the answer the subsequent questions. Each participant saw the same article about the Electoral College with a banner ad above the article and two ads embedded in the text. The ads varied depending on the condition (conservative, liberal, or neutral). Participants were asked if they read the entire article and then instructed to proceed to the next page and enter the questionnaire. The survey was complete when participants had answered all the questions and exited the online survey.

CHAPTER 7

RESULTS

The first set of hypotheses predicted that the experimental condition would affect bias toward the article. A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare conservative bias, liberal bias, and party favor against which condition participants were in (See Table 1).

Table 1
ANOVA Results

Hypothesis	Mean	Standard Deviation	F Value	p Value	N
H1a	-0.32	1.08	0.94	0.39	144
H1b	0.24	1.07	1.75	0.18	144
H1c	4.16	1.23	0.12	0.89	144
H2	4.15	0.93	0.05	0.95	144
H3	4.42	1.09	1.13	0.33	144
H4a	-0.32	1.08	1.25	0.29	144
H4b	0.23	1.07	0.23	0.92	144
H4c	4.16	1.23	0.80	0.53	144
H5	4.15	0.93	0.42	0.79	144
H6	4.42	1.09	0.40	0.81	144
H8	4.15	0.93	0.92	0.43	144

No significant difference was found among the participants in the three conditions with regard to their evaluations of conservative bias ($F(2, 141) = 0.94, p=.39$). Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. Thus, H1a was not supported. However, the data do show a trend. The liberal ad condition was rated less than the control group, which was rated less than the conservative ad condition on the conservative bias scale.

No significant difference was found among the participants in the three conditions with regard to their evaluations of liberal bias ($F(2, 141) = 1.75, p=.18$). Subsequent

Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. Thus, H1b was not supported. However, the data do show a trend. The conservative ad condition was rated less than the control group, which was rated less than the liberal ad condition on the liberal bias scale.

Participants in the three conditions did not significantly differ in their evaluation of party favor ($F(2, 141) = 0.12, p=.89$). Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. Thus, H1c was also not supported. However, the data do trend. Participants in the liberal ad condition rated the article as more biased toward the Democratic party than those in the conservative ad condition, and the control group's ratings are between the two other conditions.

The second and third hypotheses test a relationship between credibility or news value and condition. One-way ANOVAs were used to determine if there was an effect (See Table 1). No significant difference was found among participants in the three conditions with regard to the article's perceived credibility ($F(2, 141) = 0.05, p=.95$). Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. So H2 was not supported. However, there was a trend in that the control group rated the article as more credible than the other two conditions. Participants in the three conditions did not significantly differ in their evaluation of news value ($F(2, 141) = 1.13, p=.33$). Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

Hypotheses 4a, b, and c predicted that political affiliation and condition will affect perceived conservative bias, liberal bias and party favor. A 3 (condition) x 3 (political affiliation) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to compare the biases of participants of each political affiliation and each condition (See Table 1). For conservative bias as the dependent variable, the main effect for condition was not significant ($F(2,135) = 1.03, p=.36$). The main effect for political affiliation was also not significant ($F(2,135) = 0.80, p=.45$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(4, 135) = 1.25, p=.29$). These results show that political affiliation and condition do not have any significant effect on perceptions of conservative bias. Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. H4a was not supported.

For liberal bias as the dependent variable, the main effect for condition was not significant ($F(2,135) = 1.64, p=.20$), The main effect for political affiliation was also not significant ($F(2,135) = 0.19, p=.83$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(4, 135) = 0.23, p=.92$). These results show that political affiliation and condition do not have any significant effect on perceptions of liberal bias. Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. H4b was not supported.

For party favor as the dependent variable, the main effect for condition was not significant ($F(2,135) = 0.14, p=.87$), The main effect for political affiliation was also not significant ($F(2,135) = 0.33, p=.72$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(4, 135) = 0.80, p=.53$). These results show that political affiliation and condition do not have any significant effect on which political party participants perceived the news source as

favoring. Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. H4c was also not supported.

A 3 (condition) x 3 (political affiliation) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to compare the perceived credibility of participants of each political affiliation and each condition (See Table 1). The main effect for condition was not significant ($F(2,135) = 0.06, p=.95$). The main effect for political affiliation was also not significant ($F(2,135) = 1.15, p=.32$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(4, 135) = 0.42, p=.79$). These results show that political affiliation and condition do not have any significant effect on perceptions of article credibility. Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. H5 was not supported. However, the data was trending. Conservatives rated the article in the liberal ad condition as less credible than liberals did. Liberals rated the article in the conservative ad condition as less credible than conservatives did.

A 3 (condition) x 3 (political affiliation) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to compare the perceived news value of participants of each political affiliation and each condition (See Table 1). The main effect for condition was not significant ($F(2,135) = 1.36, p=.26$). The main effect for political affiliation was also not significant ($F(2,135) = 1.76, p=.18$). The interaction was also not significant ($F(4, 135) = 0.40, p=.81$). These results show that political affiliation and condition do not have any significant effect on perceptions of article news value. Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. H6 was not supported.

H7 predicted a positive correlation between a participant's level of political activity and perceived credibility. A simple linear regression was calculated to determine if a significant correlation existed (See Table 2).

Table 2
Regression Results

Hypothesis	R square	Beta	F Value	p Value	N
H7	0.004	-0.07	0.60	0.44	144
H9	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.94	144
H10	0.07	0.26	10.01	0.002	144

The regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 142) = 0.60, p=.44$) with an R^2 of 0.004. A β of -.07 shows a negative relationship. A participant's level of political activity cannot be used to predict perceived credibility. H7 was not supported.

H8 predicted a relationship between how often participants used the Internet and perceived credibility. A one-way ANOVA was calculated (See Table 1). No significant difference was found among participants' levels of Internet use with regard to their evaluation of the article's credibility ($F(3, 140) = 0.92, p=.43$). Subsequent Tukey HSD and Bonferroni post-hoc tests also revealed no further significant differences among the variables. Thus, H8 was not supported.

The final set of hypotheses predicted relationships between prior knowledge and credibility as well as prior knowledge and news value. A simple linear regression was calculated to determine if a significant correlation existed (See Table 2). For credibility as the dependent variable, the regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 142) = 0.01, p=.94$) with an R^2 of 0. A β of .01 shows a positive relationship. A participant's prior knowledge cannot be used to predict perceived credibility. H9 was not supported. However, for news value as the dependent variable, the regression equation was

significant at the .05 level ($F(1, 142) = 10.01, p=.002$) with an R^2 of .07. A β of .26 shows a positive relationship. A participant's prior knowledge can be used to predict perceived news value. H10 was supported.

The research question in the study sought to explore the relationship between gender and a number of other variables. Independent-sample t tests were used to compare the mean scores of males and the mean scores of females on bias, credibility and news value (See Table 3).

Table 3
RQ1: Gender

Dependent Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value	p value
Conservative Bias	Female	92	-0.26	1.16	0.86	0.39
	Male	52	-0.42	0.91		
Liberal Bias	Female	92	0.09	1.14	2.17	0.03
	Male	52	0.49	0.87		
Party Favor	Female	92	4.13	1.31	-0.33	0.74
	Male	52	4.20	1.10		
Credibility	Female	92	4.13	0.89	-0.29	0.77
	Male	52	4.18	1.00		
News Value	Female	92	4.30	1.08	-1.76	0.08
	Male	52	4.63	1.09		

No significant difference was found between the mean of females ($m = -0.26, sd = 1.16$) and the mean of males ($m = -0.42, sd = 0.91$) in relation to conservative bias ($t(142) = .86, p=.39$). However, the difference between the mean of females ($m = 0.09, sd = 1.14$) and the mean of males ($m = 0.49, sd = 0.87$) in relation to liberal bias were significant at the .05 level ($t(142) = -2.17, p=.03$). No significant difference was found between the mean of females ($m = 4.13, sd = 1.31$) and the mean of males ($m = 4.20, sd = 1.10$) in relation to party favor ($t(142) = -0.33, p=.74$). No significant difference was found between the mean of females ($m = 4.13, sd = 0.89$) and the mean of males ($m = 4.18, sd =$

1.00) in relation to credibility ($t(142) = -0.29, p=.77$). However, there was significance at the 0.10 level between the mean of females ($m = 4.30, sd = 1.08$) and the mean of males ($m = 4.63, sd = 1.09$) in relation to news value ($t(142) = -1.76, p=.08$).

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION

This study sought to discover if political ads could serve as a prime for readers in evaluating the bias, credibility, and news value of an online news article and its source. The findings of this study suggest that political advertising does not serve as a prime for news readers in making decisions about the political bias, credibility, and news value of an article or news source. Participants in different conditions did not vary significantly on their perceptions of the article and source. Furthermore, the study sought to understand if political affiliation of participants affected their evaluation of news article. The findings of this study indicated no such effect. Participants' political affiliation and the political ad condition they were placed in did not interact to affect their perceptions on the news article's bias, credibility, and news value.

This finding has implications for political advertisers as well as online news sites. Little previous research has been conducted to determine whether online advertisements affect the perceptions of the content they are paired with. It is possible that consumers have become so accustomed to online ads that they do not even notice them. If people gloss over ads without attending to them, then priming cannot take place. In this case, advertisers might need to reevaluate their strategies toward the use of basic banner ads placed next to website content. It is also possible that news readers see the advertising, but that the ads do not prime ideas toward the other website content.

The level of prior political knowledge, however, was statistically significant. Participants who had a higher prior knowledge of politics placed a higher news value on

the article than those with low prior knowledge. This means that those who already consume political news on a regular basis find more news value in articles than those who do not stay up to date. Newsrooms can expect consumers who regularly visit their sites to continue to find their content newsworthy.

The researchers also predicted that the level of participants' political activity would positively correlate with their perceptions of credibility and news value, and negatively correlate with their perceptions of political bias. On the contrary, the study found that the number of times participants engaged in political and campaign activities did not have a direct effect on their perceptions about the news article and source. However, it is important to note that the political activity scale responses were very skewed.

Internet consumption was also expected to be positively correlated with perceptions of credibility and news value, and negatively correlated with perceptions of political bias. The findings revealed that Internet consumption was not directly related to perceptions about the article and news source. However, it is important to note that there were far more medium-heavy to heavy users of the Internet than light users, which could have affected the results. About 80% of participants were in the third or fourth category and 43% of participants were in the fourth, and most heavy Internet use, category alone. The small number of light Internet users might have affected the results.

This study also explored the influence of gender in online news perceptions. The study found that gender had an effect on perceived liberal bias. Men were more likely to see a liberal bias in the news article than women across all conditions. Using the hostile media effect, people are more likely to see a bias opposing their own political ideology.

Therefore, these results could indicate that men in this study were more conservative overall and were therefore more likely to see a liberal bias in the media coverage. This corresponds with a finding in recent years that women are more likely to identify as Democrat than men (Newport, 2009). This has implications for conservative politicians who might need to change their advertising and marketing strategies to appeal to an increasingly liberal female demographic.

Results for the research question on gender also revealed that men were more likely to rate a news story higher on news value across all conditions. It is also possible that the name of a male reporter's byline cued readers to the news values present in the article. Studies show that male and female reporters emphasize different news values in articles (Grabe, Samson, Zelankauskiate, & Yegiyan, 2011; Kyung-Hee & Youngmin, 2009; Muramatsu, 1990). Readers might have seen a male reporter byline and assumed that the news values aligned with those of males. Men might also have felt a connection to the writer because of his gender, making them value his writing more (Guo, 2012). This finding has implications for newsrooms that might not realize that the writer's identity could influence readers' perceptions of the article. Newsrooms should have a diverse staff of reporters and editors so they can appeal to more readers.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. One limitation was in the sample and sample size. The study used a convenience sample, and most participants were students who attended communication or psychology classes. Although the sample size was large enough to conduct effective statistical tests, the study could have benefited from a greater sample size by giving more power to the data analysis. Future studies should aim to

achieve a larger and more representative sample.

Another limitation is related to the questionnaire. The survey first posed questions related to bias and credibility but did not ask questions about the article content. It is possible that because of this participants were not engaged in the survey or were confused by the type of questions immediately following the news article.

The survey layout could have also posed a problem. The news article was placed within an online survey system layout that did not resemble a news website layout at all. Readers might be more likely to observe and take cues from advertisements if they believe they are actually on a news website. Future studies should attempt to create a news website layout to make it appear more genuine to readers, perhaps activating thought processes similar to those readers bring to actual online news sites.

Asking participants to self-report political affiliation rather than use another type of measurement could also have limited the study. Because some participants might have considered the terms "conservative" and "liberal" to have certain positive or negative connotations, they might have refrained from identifying themselves with those terms. It is also possible that participants were unsure of what the terms meant or of how to define themselves in this context. For example, research shows that even in Democratic states, Americans self-identified as conservative more often than liberal (Saad, 2009). It's also important to note that all participants were currently residing in the South, a more conservative region of the U.S. This might have affected the results because people in the South are more likely to identify themselves as conservative (Saad, 2009). Because participants' political affiliation was a significant factor in the study, inaccurate responses to this question could have altered the results dramatically. Future studies should aim to

create a scale to determine political affiliation through a series of questions to ensure a more accurate measurement.

Finally, the news article used was about a topic pertaining to the presidential election, but an election had just ended 3 months prior to the survey. Participants might have found the topic to be uninteresting, so they were less likely to read it. Also, because an election had just passed, it is possible that participants did not see the topic as relevant anymore, so it did not activate their political biases through priming.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should continue to determine if advertisements on websites affect how web users evaluate the site content. Although political ads do not appear to have an effect, other types of ad primes, such as race, religion, or social class might have a greater effect. Different types of ads can also be explored. This study used banner ads, but there are many other types of online advertising that might have different effects on consumers.

Gender is a variable that has been shown to predict various consumer attitudes and behavior. This study also found that gender is a variable that affects news consumer perceptions about a news story. Future research should investigate whether men and women differ not only in perceptions of news but also in their behavior, such as the types of articles they consume or the types of news sites they choose to access regularly.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Questionnaire

Section 1: Perceived Political Bias (Hostile Media Bias)

The article was greatly biased ...

against Conservatives -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Conservatives

The article made ...

Conservatives seem unlikeable -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 Conservatives seem likeable

Conservatives seem bad -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 Conservatives seem good

The writer of the article is greatly biased ...

against Conservatives -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Conservatives

The newspaper that printed the article is greatly biased ...

against Conservatives -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Conservatives

The article was greatly biased ...

against Liberals -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Liberals

The article made ...

Liberals seem unlikeable -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 Liberals seem likeable

Liberals seem bad -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 Liberals seem good

The writer of the article is greatly biased ...

against Liberals -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Liberals

The newspaper that printed the article is greatly biased ...

against Liberals -3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3 in favor of Liberals

To what extent does the article's writer favor a political party?

Democrats 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Republicans

To what extent does the article's newspaper favor a political party?

Democrats 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Republicans

Section 2: Credibility

How would you rate this article on the following:

Is fair 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is unfair

Is biased 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is unbiased

Tells the whole story 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Doesn't tell the whole story

Is accurate 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is inaccurate

Invades people's privacy 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Respects people's privacy

Does watch after reader's interests 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Does not watch after reader's interests

Is concerned about the community's well-being 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is not concerned about the community's well-being

Does separate fact and opinion 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Does not separate fact and opinion

Can be trusted 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Cannot be trusted

Is concerned about the public interest 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is concerned about making profits

Is factual 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Is opinionated

Has well-trained reporters 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Has poorly-trained reporters

Section 3: News Values

How would you rate this article on the following:

Interest to readers

boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 interesting

Usefulness to readers

useless 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 useful

Completeness

lacking detail 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Timeliness

untimely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 timely

Mechanical/grammatical accuracy

poorly written 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 grammatically correct

Section 4: Political Behavior and Media Consumption

How would you describe yourself politically?

Very Strong Democrat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strong Republican

How many times have you participated in the following political activities?

- a. Circulated a petition for a candidate or issue? _____
- b. Contributed money to a social group or cause? _____
- c. Worked on behalf of a social group or cause? _____
- d. Contributed money to a political party or campaign? _____
- e. Worked for a political party or campaign? _____

Most news media are biased against my views
 Definitely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely agree

From where do you get most of your news?

- a. newspaper
- b. television
- c. online
- d. radio
- e. other

How often do you consume news?

- a. every day
- b. four to six days per week
- c. one to three days per week
- d. less than one day per week

On average, how much time do you spend consuming news each week?

- a. less than one hour
- b. one to five hours
- c. five to 10 hours
- d. more than 10 hours

On average, how much time do you spend online each week?

- a. less than one hour
- b. one to five hours
- c. five to 10 hours
- d. more than 10 hours

Do you consider yourself up-to-date on political issues?

I do not consume political news at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 I stay current

Are you female or male?

- Female
- Male

APPENDIX B: News Article

ELECTORAL COLLEGE MATH: NOT ALL VOTES ARE EQUAL

By Seth Borenstein

When it comes to electing the president, not all votes are created equal. And chances are yours will count less than those of a select few.

For example, the vote of Dave Smith in Sheridan, Wyo., counts almost 3 1/2 times as much mathematically as those of his wife's aunts in northeastern Ohio.

Why? Electoral College math.

A statistical analysis of the state-by-state voting-eligible population shows that Wyoming has 139,000 eligible voters — those 18 and over, U.S. citizens and non-felons — for every presidential elector chosen in the state. In Ohio, it's almost 476,000 per elector, and it's nearly 478,000 in neighboring Pennsylvania.

But there's mathematical weight and then there's the reality of political power in a system where the president is decided not by the national popular vote but by an 18th century political compromise: the Electoral College.

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The nine battleground states where candidates spend a lot of time and money — Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Colorado, New Hampshire, Iowa, Nevada, North Carolina and Wisconsin — have 44.1 million people eligible to vote. That's only 20.7 percent of the nation's 212.6 million eligible voters. So nearly 4 of 5 eligible voters are pretty much being ignored by campaigns.

When you combine voter-to-electror comparisons and battleground state populations, there are clear winners and losers in elections.

More than half the nation's eligible voters live in states that are losers in both categories. Their states are not closely contested and have above-average ratios of voters to electors. This is true for people in 14 states with 51 percent of the nation's eligible voters: California, New York, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, Georgia, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Indiana, Tennessee, Missouri, Maryland, Louisiana and Kentucky. Their votes count the least.

The biggest winners in the system, those whose votes count the most, live in just four states: Colorado, New Hampshire, Iowa and Nevada. They have low voter-to-electror ratios and are in battleground states. Only 4 percent of the nation's eligible voters — 1 in 25 — live in those states.

It's all dictated by the U.S. Constitution, which set up the Electoral College. The number of electors each state gets depends on the size of its congressional delegation. Even the least populated states — like Wyoming — get a minimum of three, meaning more crowded states get less proportionally.

If the nation's Electoral College votes were apportioned in a strict one-person, one-vote manner, each state would get one elector for every 395,000 eligible voters. Some 156 million voters live in the 20 states that have a larger ratio than that average: That's 73 percent — nearly 3 out of 4.

And for most people, it's even more unrepresentative. About 58 percent of the nation's eligible voting population lives in states with voter-to-electors ratios three times as large as Wyoming's. In other words, Dave Smith's voting power is about equal to three of his wife's aunts and uncles in Ohio, and most people in the nation are on the aunt-and-uncle side of that unbalanced equation.

"It's a terrible system; it's the most undemocratic way of electing a chief executive in the world," said Paul Finkelman, a law professor at Albany Law School who teaches this year at Duke University. "There's no other electoral system in the world where the person with the most votes doesn't win."

The statistical analysis uses voter eligibility figures for 2010 calculated by political science professor Michael McDonald at George Mason University. McDonald is a leader in the field of voter turnout.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming defends the Electoral College system for protecting small states in elections, which otherwise might be overrun by big city campaigning: "Once you get rid of the Electoral College, the election will be conducted in New York and San Francisco."

Sure it gives small states more power, but at what price? asks Douglas Amy, a political science professor at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts: "This clearly violates that basic democratic principle of one person, one vote. Indeed, many constitutional scholars point out that this unfair arrangement would almost certainly be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on those grounds if it were not actually in the Constitution."

Article 2 of the Constitution says presidents are voted on by electors (it doesn't mention the word college) with each state having a number equal to its U.S. senators and representatives. While representatives are allocated among the states proportional by population, senators are not. Every state gets two. So Wyoming has 0.2 percent of the nation's voting-eligible population but almost 0.6 percent of the Electoral College. And since the number of electors is limited to 538, some states get less proportionately.

Adding to this, most states have an all-or-nothing approach to the Electoral College. A candidate can win a state by just a handful of votes but get all the electors. That happened in 2000, when George W. Bush, after much dispute, won Florida by 537 votes out of about 6 million and got all 27 electoral votes. He won the presidential election but lost the national popular vote that year.

That election led some states to sign a compact promising to give their electoral votes to the national popular vote winner. But that compact would go into effect only if and when states with the 270 majority of electoral votes signed on. So far nine states with 132 electoral votes have signed, all predominantly Democratic states.

Because of the 2000 election, conservatives and Republicans tend to feel that changing the Electoral College would hurt them, George Mason's McDonald said, and after their big victories in 2010, the popular vote compact movement stalled. But that analysis may not necessarily be true, he added. McDonald said before opinion polls started to break for Obama there seemed to be a possibility that he could win the electoral vote and lose the popular vote because of weak turnout — but still enough to win — in traditionally Democratic states like New York and California.

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John McGinnis, a professor of constitutional law at Northwestern University, defends the current Electoral College, arguing that while the mathematics of electoral proportionate calculations is correct, the conclusion that it over-represents small states is not. Larger states still have more sway because they have more electoral votes, he said.

Further, the historical agreement to give each state two senators regardless of their population and to base electoral votes on congressional delegation rather than population "was an essential compromise" when framers were drafting the Constitution, McGinnis said. Without that compromise, there might not have been a Constitution or nation, he said.

But Finkelman said his reading of history is that the compromise wasn't about power between small and large states as much as it was about power of slave-holding states. He said James Madison wanted direct popular election of the president, but because African-American slaves wouldn't count, that would give more power to the North. So the framers came up with a compromise to count each slave as three-fifths of a person for representation in Congress and presidential elections, he said.

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APPENDIX C: Layouts

Control Condition

Thank you for getting out the vote this year.
Your voice matters.



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Support schools
so children can have
the opportunity to receive
a good education.



Support our
troops.

Conservative Ads Condition

Thank you for re-electing Rep. Steve Fincher, to the eighth district. Your voice matters.



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Support our military. Tell your senator to support much-needed defense funding.



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Thank you for re-electing Rep. Jim Cooper,
to the fifth district. Your voice matters.



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But there's mathematical weight and then there's the reality of political power in a system where the president is decided not by the national popular vote but by an 18th century political compromise: the Electoral College.

Smith figures his vote in solid Republican Wyoming really doesn't count that much. The same could be said for ballots cast in solid Democratic states like New York or Vermont. In Ohio, one of the biggest battleground states, Smith's relatives are bombarded with political ads. In Wyoming, Smith says, "the candidates don't care about my vote because we only see election commercials from out-of-state TV stations."

The nine battleground states where candidates spend a lot of time and money — Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Colorado, New Hampshire, Iowa, Nevada, North Carolina and Wisconsin — have 44.1 million people eligible to vote. That's only 20.7 percent of the nation's 212.6 million eligible voters. So nearly 4 of 5 eligible voters are pretty much being ignored by campaigns.

When you combine voter-to-electoral comparisons and battleground state populations, there are clear winners and losers in elections.

More than half the nation's eligible voters live in states that are losers in both categories. Their states are not closely contested and have above-average ratios of voters to electors. This is true for people in 14 states with 51 percent of the nation's eligible voters: California, New York, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, Georgia, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Indiana, Tennessee, Missouri, Maryland, Louisiana and Kentucky. Their votes count the least.

The biggest winners in the system, those whose votes count the most, live in just four states: Colorado, New Hampshire, Iowa and Nevada. They have low voter-to-electoral ratios and are in battleground states. Only 4 percent of the nation's eligible voters — 1 in 25 — live in those states.

It's all dictated by the U.S. Constitution, which set up the Electoral College. The number of electors each state gets depends on the size of its congressional delegation. Even the least populated states — like Wyoming — get a minimum of three, meaning more crowded states get less proportionally.

If the nation's Electoral College votes were apportioned in a strict one-person, one-vote manner, each state would get one elector for every 395,000 eligible voters. Some 156 million voters live in the 20 states that have a larger ratio than that average: That's 73 percent — nearly 3 out of 4.

And for most people, it's even more unrepresentative. About 58 percent of the nation's eligible voting population lives in states with voter-to-electoral ratios three times as large as Wyoming's. In other words, Dave Smith's voting power is about equal to three of his wife's aunts and uncles in Ohio, and most people in the nation are on the aunt-and-uncle side of that unbalanced equation.

"It's a terrible system; it's the most undemocratic way of electing a chief executive in the world," said Paul Finkelman, a law professor at Albany Law School who teaches this year at Duke University. "There's no other electoral system in the world where the person with the most votes doesn't win."

The statistical analysis uses voter eligibility figures for 2010 calculated by political science professor Michael McDonald at George Mason University. McDonald is a leader in the field of voter turnout.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming defends the Electoral College system for protecting small states in elections, which otherwise might be overrun by big city campaigning: "Once you get rid of the Electoral College, the election will be conducted in New York and San Francisco."

Sure it gives small states more power, but at what price? asks Douglas Amy, a political science professor at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts: "This clearly violates that basic democratic principle of one person, one vote. Indeed, many constitutional scholars point out that this unfair arrangement would almost certainly be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on those grounds if it were not actually in the Constitution."

Article 2 of the Constitution says presidents are voted on by electors (it doesn't mention the word college) with each state having a number equal to its U.S. senators and representatives. While representatives are allocated among the states proportional by population, senators are not. Every state gets two. So Wyoming has 0.2 percent of the nation's voting-eligible population but almost 0.6 percent of the Electoral College. And since the number of electors is limited to 538, some states get less proportionately.

Adding to this, most states have an all-or-nothing approach to the Electoral College. A candidate can win a state by just a handful of votes but get all the electors. That happened in 2000, when George W. Bush, after much dispute, won Florida by 537 votes out of about 6 million and got all 27 electoral votes. He won the presidential election but lost the national popular vote that year.

That election led some states to sign a compact promising to give their electoral votes to the national popular vote winner. But that compact would go into effect only if and when states with the 270 majority of electoral votes signed on. So far nine states with 132 electoral votes have signed, all predominantly Democratic states.

Because of the 2000 election, conservatives and Republicans tend to feel that changing the Electoral College would hurt them, George Mason's McDonald said, and after their big victories in 2010, the popular vote compact movement stalled. But that analysis may not necessarily be true, he added. McDonald said before opinion polls started to break for Obama there seemed to be a possibility that he could win the electoral vote and lose the popular vote because of weak turnout — but still enough to win — in traditionally Democratic states like New York and California.

History shows that candidates have won the presidency but not the popular vote four times, and in each case it was the Democrat who got the most votes but lost the presidency: 1824, 1876, 1888 and 2000.

John McGinnis, a professor of constitutional law at Northwestern University, defends the current Electoral College, arguing that while the mathematics of electoral proportionate calculations is correct, the conclusion that it over-represents small states is not. Larger states still have more sway because they have more electoral votes, he said.

Further, the historical agreement to give each state two senators regardless of their population and to base electoral votes on congressional delegation rather than population "was an essential compromise" when framers were drafting the Constitution, McGinnis said. Without that compromise, there might not have been a Constitution or nation, he said.

But Finkelman said his reading of history is that the compromise wasn't about power between small and large states as much as it was about power of slave-holding states. He said James Madison wanted direct popular election of the president, but because African-American slaves wouldn't count, that would give more power to the North. So the framers came up with a compromise to count each slave as three-fifths of a person for representation in Congress and presidential elections, he said.

Electoral College supporter McGinnis said the emphasis on battleground states is actually good because they are representative of the country. But he acknowledges as an Illinois resident, "I realize when I vote here it's completely irrelevant."



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