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Voting behaviour in Singapore: A preliminary investigation from a multi-attribute attitudinal perspective

S. M. LEONG

Chin Tiong TAN
Singapore Management University, cttan@smu.edu.sg

K. C. WONG

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A Preliminary Investigation
From a Multi-Attribute Attitudinal
Perspective

Leong Siew Meng, Tan Chin Tiong and Wong Kwei Cheong*

The multi-attribute attitude model is employed to study voter behaviour in Singapore. Specifically, a set of beliefs of the personal attributes of political candidates considered important to voters was examined. Results indicated that such beliefs did predict voters' affective evaluation and intention to vote for a typical political candidate reasonably well. Implications of the findings are discussed and suggestions for future research provided.

INTRODUCTION

The use of marketing techniques in the political arena has increased tremendously over the past two decades. This trend has been motivated partially by the broadening of the marketing concept into areas beyond traditional goods and services, and also by the growing importance of electronic media for communicating with voters. The so-called "new politics" has adopted such basic tools as product design, packaging, and promotion to market political candidates and campaigns (Mauser, 1983). Indeed, it has been estimated that in 1984, political candidates in the United States spent about $180 million on television, $90 million on radio advertising, $40 million on newspaper advertising, and bombarded American homes with several hundred million pieces of direct mail (Diamond and Bates, 1984; Grey Advertising, 1984).

Despite the growing impact of marketing in the political arena in the Western world, political marketing in Asia is much less pronounced. However, with increased demands from a more sophisticated and politically mature electorate, the need to understand the desires of voters, develop the right "products," and communicate and distribute them in an effective manner becomes critical. Anecdotal evidence in the popular press in Singapore has already acknowledged "television's awesome power in influencing public opinion . . ." (Kwan, 1987).

* Lecturer and Associate Professors respectively in the Department of Marketing, Faculty of Business Administration, National University of Singapore.

Implementation of an effective marketing programme within a political campaign is predicated upon a clear understanding of voter preferences and attitudes (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1987). This paper reports the results of a preliminary study conducted to provide initial insight into the characteristics of political candidates deemed important by voters and how well they predict attitudes toward and intentions to vote for them. The conceptual framework employed is one variant of the multi-attribute attitude model, the single most researched model in marketing (Lutz and Bettman, 1977; Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973). The basic premise of this model is that the cognitive beliefs held by voters of political candidates impact their affective evaluation and likelihood of voting for them.

A key benefit accruing from the use of this model is the conceptualisation of the product (the political candidate) as a bundle of attributes which vary in importance to the voter. The formulation of a marketing plan can thus be facilitated by (1) uncovering the salient attributes employed by the electorate, (2) developing and introducing a new product (candidate) or repositioning an existing one which more closely approximates that desired by the voters, and (3) designing a communication strategy to influence voters with an appropriate blend of mass-media promotion (e.g. television advertising) and personal selling (e.g. door-to-door visits).

The major objective of this paper is to apply the multi-attribute attitude model to examine voter behaviour in Singapore. Given its exploratory nature, this study examines how voters integrate a bundle of attributes of a political candidate and use the information to form an overall evaluation of that candidate. It will not seek to investigate the effects of a candidate's party affiliation on attitude formation and voting intentions. A secondary purpose is to identify the personal attributes of political candidates that most influence voting tendencies in the country.

Singapore was selected for study for several reasons. First, the mass media has a potentially pervasive effect on voter opinion given the high ownership and subscription levels of radios, television sets, and newspapers. Second, the employment of marketing techniques has become more prevalent and has spread to include non-profit and social organisations. Singaporeans are therefore becoming increasingly accustomed to the marketing practices of non-commercial enterprises. Third, with rising levels of education and affluence, Singaporeans may now be more politically conscious.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: The next section provides a review of the literature on multi-attribute models. Different versions of the model are presented and their marketing applications discussed. Three hypotheses for empirical testing are advanced. Next, the research method used in the study is described. The characteristics of the respondents to the survey are furnished and the measurement procedure detailed. Following this, the results of the study are provided. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several versions of multi-attribute attitude models have been investigated in marketing over the past 20 years. Earliest works in the field were based on the Fishbein (1963) theory of attitude formation and change as well as Rosenberg's (1956) framework of consistency theory in explaining persuasion.

Traditional Approaches

The Fishbein model can be summarised by the equation

$$A_o = (\sum_{i=1}^{n} b_i a_i)$$

where A_o is the attitude (affect for or against) toward any psychological object; b_i is the belief (subjective likelihood) that object o possesses some attribute i; a_i is the evaluation (e.g. goodness or badness) of attribute i; and n is the number of salient attributes. Thus, attitude is seen as the multiplicative summation of salient beliefs about an object weighted by the value of those beliefs. In contrast, Rosenberg's model may be summarised by the relation $A_o = f(\sum_{i=1}^{m} PI_i VI_i)$ where A_o is the affect for or against an object; PI_i is the perceived instrumentality of that object in leading to or blocking the attainment of the particular value i; VI_i is the value importance of the ith value, expressed as the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction felt by the individual with respect to that value; and m is the number of salient values.

Marketing Applications

While several studies have been conducted using the Fishbein (e.g. Bettman, Capon, and Lutz, 1975; Burnkrant and Page, 1982) and the Rosenberg (e.g. Hansen, 1969; Mazis, Ahtola, and Klippel, 1975) models, the bulk of marketing applications has employed some amalgamation of the two traditional approaches (see Lutz and Bettman, 1977, and Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973 for reviews). Lutz and Bettman (1977) characterise this intuitive approach by the equation $S = f(B, I)$ where S is a summary measure of approach tendency toward a brand (e.g. attitude, preference, intention to purchase, or choice); B is a measure of consumers' beliefs regarding the brand's possession of various attributes; and I is the importance (or salience) of these attributes in the mind of the consumer (see e.g. Bass and Wilkie, 1973).

Of particular popularity has been the adequacy-importance model in which

$$A_o = f(\sum_{i=1}^{n} B_i I_i)$$

which assumes the above parameter definitions and adopts the multiplicative summation formulation of the Fishbein and Rosenberg models. This variation involves

measuring belief as the degree of possession of an attribute (e.g. high-low) and importance as a weighting term (e.g. important-unimportant) with attitude measured as the affective evaluation of an object.

Recent Developments

The traditional models characterise attitude as the summation of products of expectancies and values. Hence, they assume an isomorphic correspondence between a unidimensional attitude and its cognitive belief components. Clearly, this poses problems in construct validation (cf. Bagozzi, 1982).

More recently, Bagozzi (1982) and others have suggested that cognitive beliefs also affect behavioural intentions directly. Moreover, attitude has been explicated as a multidimensional affective state that may include emotional reactions being associated with the object or act. This might occur through various forms of conditioning (Bagozzi, 1982). As a consequence,

$$A_o = \sum_{i=1}^{n} X_i$$

where X_i is the ith type of affective reaction and n is the total number of such reactions. The cognitive component may be operationalised as $\sum_{i=1}^{n} B_i I_i$ as before. It is these equations which will be used in our study of voting intentions.

In addition, several issues with regard to measurement and model structure have been raised. Specifically, it has been noted that several approaches exist for measuring beliefs. For example, the use of ideal points has been advocated for attributes in which "more" is not necessarily better. Intuitively, this does not appear appropriate in the present research context. Moreover, the ideal-point approach has not outperformed the typical method employed here (which assumes that more of a characteristic is preferred) and also has caused respondent miscomprehension (Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973).

The general structure of multi-attribute attitude models is linear compensatory in nature wherein objects can achieve given attitude scores by compensating for low ratings on one attribute with high ratings on another. Other choice mechanisms exist (e.g. lexicographic, conjunctive, and disjunctive) but these have been outperformed by the linear compensatory approach used in this study (Wilkie and Pessmier, 1973).

Hypotheses

Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses are advanced for empirically assessing political voting behaviour from a multi-attribute attitudinal perspective:

H1 : A voter's affect towards a political candidate is positively corre-lated with his cognitive beliefs of that candidate.

H2 : A voter's behavioural intention to vote for a political candidate is positively correlated with his affect towards that candidate.

H3 : A voter's behavioural intention to vote for a political candidate is positively correlated with this cognitive beliefs of that candidate.

METHODOLOGY

Sample Characteristics

A convenience sample of 547 respondents was drawn from six constituencies. Personal interviews lasting an average of half-an-hour were conducted by a team of business undergraduates. Table 1 depicts the sample profile.

Measurement

A close-ended survey questionnaire containing five-point scales was designed to measure variables of interest. Developing a pool of relevant items required the identification of the attitude object. It was decided that the typical People's Action Party Member of Parliament (PAP MP) be the focus of the study because of the familiarity of this political candidate to the electorate. The PAP has been in power in Singapore since 1959 and currently holds an overwhelming majority in Parliament. The typical, rather than a particular, PAP MP was used to enhance the generality of the results beyond particular constituencies.

A list of attributes of the political candidate was generated. Based on prior research in the U.S. (cf. Kinder et al, 1980), a pool of 20 attributes was developed for the survey. Included were items pertaining to honesty, open-mindedness, grassroot support, problem-solving ability, intelligence, persuasiveness, and charisma. Likert-type scales were provided for respondents who indicated the extent to which they agreed with a set of 20 statements with the same stem "The typical PAP MP is . . .". These constituted the belief (B_i) scores for analysis. Respondents also indicated the degree of importance they attached to each of these attributes on a scale ranging from 'Very Important' to 'Not Important'. These constituted importance (I_i) scores for analysis.[1] The overall cognitive belief ($\sum_{i=1}^{20} B_i I_i$) score was derived through a multiplicative summation of the respective B_i and I_i scores across the 20 attributes for each respondent.

TABLE 1

Sample Profile of Survey Respondents (n = 547)[*]

Sex	
Male	56%
Female	43%
Race	
Chinese	69%
Malay	13%
Indian	12%
Other	5%
Occupation	
Managerial/Professional	10%
Supervisory/Technical	20%
Clerical/Sales/Production	25%
Self-Employed/Family Business	7%
Other	30%
Unemployed	8%
Age	
21-30	53%
31-40	26%
40 and above	20%
Education	
University	13%
'A' Levels	19%
'O' Levels	48%
Primary 6	19%
Annual Income	
Less than $12,000	38%
$12,000 - 24,000	36%
$24,001 - 36,000	15%
$36,001 - 50,000	8%
$50,000 and above	2%

[*]   Some percentages do not sum to 100% due to non-response on selected questions.

The overall affect (A_o) measure was also based on prior research in the U.S. (cf. Kinder et al. 1980). An eight-item inventory was constructed in which respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with such statements as 'I am (angry with, proud of, sympathetic with, disgusted with) the typical PAP MP'. The A_o score for each respondent was obtained by summing across the eight items.

The behavioural intention (BI) measure was a single-item scale in which respondents indicated the likelihood they would vote for the PAP candidate on a scale ranging from 'Very Likely' to 'Very Unlikely'.

RESULTS

Pearson correlations were used to test the three hypotheses. Beyond reporting the results of the hypotheses testing, additional diagnostic information is provided through disaggregative analysis in which each cognitive belief ($B_i I_i$) is treated as an independent variable to explain likelihood to vote in a multiple regression analysis. This analysis was conducted to achieve the secondary objective of identifying which personal attributes of political candidates most influence voting tendencies. Descriptive statistics of the variables in this study are found in Table 2 (belief and importance scores for the 20 attributes) and in Table 3 (affect and behavioural intention).

Hypotheses Testing

All three hypotheses were supported. Pearson correlation coefficients were .60, .59, and .52 respectively for H1, H2, and H3 (n's= 478, 521, and 483, p's < .001)[2]. The likelihood of voting for the typical PAP MP correlates positively with both the affective and cognitive evaluations of the typical PAP MP. Affective evaluation of the typical PAP MP also correlated positively with the cognitive beliefs of the respondents.

Additional Analyses

In a stepwise multiple regression analysis, the individual cognitive beliefs were used to explain variation in likelihood of voting for the typical PAP MP[3]. Results indicated that nine of the 20 beliefs were included in the final equation. These were (in order of entry) honesty, talking sense, visiting constituents, intelligence, ability to relate with constituents, persuasiveness, morality, communicative ability, and open-mindedness. These items collectively explained about 33% of the variance in the respondents' voting intention (p < .001).

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics For Voting Attributes
and Overall Cognitive Evaluation[*]

Attribute	Belief Score	Importance Score
The Typical PAP MP:		
Is Honest	3.66 (0.95)	4.72 (0.62)
Is Open-minded	3.53 (1.05)	4.47 (0.77)
Is Courageous	3.46 (1.12)	4.50 (0.73)
Relates To Constituents	3.71 (1.06)	4.58 (0.65)
Is Interested In Feedback	3.82 (1.07)	4.58 (0.75)
Is Not Arrogant[+]	3.30 (1.17)	4.33 (0.87)
Does Not Echo Views of PAP[+]	2.52 (1.06)	4.24 (0.97)
Has Grassroot Support	3.98 (0.91)	4.32 (0.89)
Communicates Government Policy Effectively	3.81 (1.03)	4.57 (0.66)
Solves Problems	3.44 (1.06)	4.62 (0.63)
Talks Sense	3.80 (0.94)	4.56 (0.72)
Is Not Immoral[+]	3.58 (1.13)	4.60 (0.68)
Is Intelligent	4.02 (0.90)	4.49 (0.73)
Is Outspoken	3.26 (1.23)	4.29 (0.90)
Is Persuasive	3.58 (1.03)	4.25 (0.84)
Has Charisma	3.48 (1.07)	4.10 (0.95)
Has Personality	3.67 (1.02)	4.33 (0.89)
Visits Constituents	3.16 (1.28)	4.16 (0.92)
Listens to Views	3.53 (1.10)	4.41 (0.77)
Is Knowledgeable	4.00 (0.96)	4.57 (0.68)
Overall Cognitive Evaluation of		
Typical PAP MP	320.50 (71.57)	

[1.] Mean scores of items measured on five-point scales with higher scores indicating greater agreement. Standard deviations in parentheses.

[2.] Items reverse scored for data analysis.

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics For Individual Affect
Items, Overall Affect, and Behavioural Intention*

Item	Score
I .... the typical PAP MP:	
Am Not Angry With[+]	3.39 (1.04)
Am Proud Of	3.32 (0.97)
Like	3.47 (0.95)
Am Not Frustrated With	3.43 (1.01)
Am Happy With	3.38 (0.92)
Am At Ease With	3.40 (0.98)
Am Sympathetic With	2.74 (0.98)
Am Not Disgusted With[+]	3.52 (0.96)
Overall Affect Towards Typical PAP MP	26.64 (5.40)
Likelihood of Voting	3.55 (0.97)

*   Mean scores of items measured on five-point scales with higher scores representing greater agreement. Standard deviations in parentheses.

\+   Item reverse-scored in data analysis.

DISCUSSION

There has been widespread acceptance of the need for political parties and candidates to engage in strategic market planning based on careful consumer (voter) research. This study attempts to provide some insights into the beliefs and perceptions of the Singaporean voter. The major findings are that (1) the cognitive beliefs of the Singaporean voter correlated positively with his affective evaluation of a typical political candidate, (2) these beliefs also influenced his behavioural intentions to vote for the candidate, (3) the affective evaluation of the typical political candidate was positively associated with likelihood to vote for that candidate, and (4) the major salient attributes in a typical political candidate that accounted for variation in voting intention included honesty, talking sense, visiting constituents, intelligence, ability to relate with constituents, persuasiveness, morality, communicative ability, and open-mindedness.

Theoretical Implications

The present study focused narrowly on the personal attributes of political candidates and how their cognitive evaluation by voters could impact voter affect and voting intentions. Clearly, additional research may be conducted to broaden the scope of this effort. Other influences on voting behaviour such as (1) affective evaluations of the party, (2) important reference groups and individuals (e.g. parents, friends, colleagues, and neighbours), (3) cognitive evaluations of important political party attributes (e.g. strong leadership, sound economic policies, and good international relations), (4) physical attributes of political candidates (e.g. appearance, age and sex), (5) voter characteristics (e.g. demographics and psychographics), and (6) previous voting behaviour can be examined.

Moreover, it may be useful to incorporate other dependent variables in future research. A partial list would include such constructs as (1) satisfaction toward the political party, (2) satisfaction toward individual political candidates, (3) likelihood in assisting campaign efforts, (4) probability of exerting influence on others in their voting, and (5) actual voting behaviour. Longitudinal analyses would also be useful to track shifts in voter attitudes and preferences. The impact of relevant political events on such constructs may also be assessed in this manner.

Methodological Implications

This study employed a cross-sectional survey on a convenience sample and simple correlational techniques were used in data analysis. Given its exploratory nature, this approach appears adequate. However, a larger and more representative sample is required for generalisation of results. Moreover, experimental work manipulating subsets of independent variables and observing their effects on voting tendencies may also be conducted in order to infer the causality of the proposed relationships.

Marketing Implications

Notwithstanding these theoretical and methodological limitations, the marketing implications of the present results will now be discussed. In the design and implementation of a campaign for a typical political candidate in Singapore, the major attributes identified in this study may be stressed. For example, it would appear that the selection of aspiring candidates may be partially based on attributes that affect voting intentions such as honesty, intelligence and articulateness. Beyond these basic qualifications, there is need to "package" the candidate with attributes such as communicative skills that are perceived to be important by the voters. The candidate should be equipped with adequate communicative skills that project an image of being able to relate to and persuade the electorate.

The findings also have implications for the positioning and promotion of candidates. Potential and current political candidates may emphasise a mix of key attributes on which they consider having a competitive differential advantage. For example, a candidate who positions himself as an open-minded individual could highlight his speeches in Parliament that are politically provocative.

In campaigning, it would seem that mass-media could impact the creation of awareness of a candidate's strong attributes. However, it would seem that these impressions have to be reinforced by personal contact. The findings indicate that visiting constituents, being able to relate to them, and having an ability to communicate policies effectively are attributes for success. As such, it would indicate a continuing need for incumbent MPs to have meet-the-people and feedback sessions with their constituents. For defeated candidates, it appears that attempts need be made to continue ties with their constituents to demonstrate a long-term commitment to them.

The findings do not, however, suggest specific themes for particular candidates contesting in particular constituencies. Further research at the constituency-level can be conducted for this purpose since it is very likely that each would have voters of different needs and characteristics. This study furnishes the springboard for such research by indicating a set of attributes that may be more closely examined. Such research would also encompass the traditional study of voter demographics (e.g. age, income, and education level) as well as more contemporary psychographic analysis (e.g. the activities, interests, and opinions of voters). In one sense, constituency-level market research would provide insight for segmentation purposes as each constituency may be considered a separate market potentially requiring its own unique marketing programme. Of particular importance would be the identification of uncommitted voters and their characteristics and needs. This group is highly attractive to politicians because of their lack of allegiance to any party.

CONCLUSION

Political parties and candidates around the world are increasingly implementing the marketing concept in campaigning. Such an approach is founded on a comprehensive determination of the needs of the consumer (electorate) and the design of a marketing programme to meet these needs efficiently and effectively. This study represents an initial attempt to explain the underlying cognitive and affective bases of voter intentions. Future research based on the general directions suggested in this paper is encouraged. Such efforts will enable a more complete understanding of voter attitudes, intentions, and behaviour in Singapore and other Asian nations.

ENDNOTES

1.　An additive approach was used for the importance scores weighting term. An alternative would be to employ an averaging method which constrains the sum of importance scores to one.

2.　For H2, a partial correlation test would also be appropriate as it isolates the magnitude of the relationship between attitude and behavioural intention in partialling out the effects of beliefs. The result of this test was an obtained coefficient of $r = .41$ ($p < .001$) indicating support for H2.

3.　As an exploratory study, a stepwise regression approach employed here appears adequate. Technically, a principal components regression is more suited given the inherent multi-collinearity in the data. Details of the stepwise regression results can be obtained from the authors.

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