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## Media Impact on Public Opinion: LGBTQ Issues

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THE MEDIA IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION:  
LGBTQ ISSUES

A Thesis

by

GABRIEL M GALVAN

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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THE MEDIA IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION:  
LGBTQ ISSUES

A Thesis  
by  
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MAY 2020



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## ABSTRACT

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This study's research question asks what impact "new media" has on public opinion regarding LGBTQ issues. This study uses a survey conducted at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley on the student body on campus. Using an ordered logistic regression analysis to test for a variety of independent variables, this paper finds that the type of media has a minor impact in public opinion on LGBTQ issues. Other control variables include religiosity, race and ethnicity, perceived economic class, and political ideology. This research is grounded on the theory that media can have an impact on the political positions of media consumers.





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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of this study is to attempt to understand how the issue of new media consumption impacts public opinion towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. The data used in this paper comes from a survey conducted at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). The respondents are all students, and the survey asks what kind of media an otherwise ideologically similar population consumes. What is the relationship between new media consumption and public opinion towards LGBTQ individuals? This question could potentially give key insights on how new media impacts ideology.

There are competing views on how the media impacts ideology. The propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1992) grounds this research with a theoretical framework, which claims that media firms have an agenda of influencing public opinion. This study contends that news firms have ideological positions and use their influence to impact the views of their consumers. This theory is based on the idea that media can and does influence ideological and political positions of media consumers. While this is a compelling assumption to make, Herman and Chomsky do not test it. Other scholars that study media find evidence of media effects on public opinion (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis, 2003; Chomsky, Barclay 2010). Chomsky and Barclay find evidence of media effects on public opinion. In contrast, some scholars argue that media does not

impact public opinion, but rather, they reflect the views of their consumers (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006).

This study investigates whether the media influences the views of their consumers. The dependent variable in this study is public opinion towards LGBTQ people. In addition, there may be noteworthy influencing variables that can be found looking into the various other factors, such as race, gender, religiosity, and voting behavior, as well as the intersection of these variables. Notably, this study looks at the potential unique impact that new media sources has compared to their traditional counterparts.

This study is significant for a plethora of reasons. For one, young adults who identify as LGBTQ in places such as the Rio Grande Valley are a minority group within a minority group. LGBTQ people in the Rio Grande Valley face intersectional oppression due to their sexual and ethnic identity. Furthermore, it addresses whether LGBTQ young adults are receiving the right amount of support from the communities they grew up in, which may impact levels of depression and anxiety for LGBTQ young adults. Most importantly, more and more individuals are receiving their news and information from new media sources. New media can range from reputable sources, such as Newsy or Yahoo News, along with individual online personas and blogs, such as Tim Pool and Philip DeFranco, as well as other blogs found on Facebook. While this study looks into a demographically similar population, this study hopes to find key differences in media consumption within the sample. Most importantly, with the Russian government's attempted use of social media in influencing the 2016 presidential election, it is more important than ever to investigate the difference between traditional media and new media. New media is pervasive, particularly for younger audiences. This paper posits that new media effects are under theorized in political science.

Compared to old media, the internet is structured in such a way that provides numerous and diverse outlets. Individuals can self-select their news sources, like their favorite pages, subscribe to their favorite YouTube channels, and follow their favorite Twitter handles. This allows regular individuals to select their news preferences, while avoiding the traditional news filters, such as CNN or *The New York Times*. It also allows regular people to become famous commentators. This study delineates media into two categories:

1. Traditional media, consisting of radio, television, and newspapers
2. New media, consisting of news and information solely distributed by internet and social media outlets.

In many respects, this has an egalitarian effect. Historically, media firms have often been dominated by the wealthy elite, and the internet allows ordinary people to usurp the dominance from established institutions like CNN or *The New York Times*. There are some legitimate concerns, however, about new media, or news media that comes solely from internet web pages. Of paramount concern is the problem of “fake news,” or news that is false meant to mislead readers. Because of the nature of the internet, individual people can anonymously create numerous websites and news stories that are both inflammatory and false.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is narrowly focused on the question of what effect new media has on public opinion compared to traditional media. This presupposes that the media has an impact on public opinion. However, some scholars disagree with this assertion.

#### **Minimal Effects**

Zaller (1998) argues that the influence of the media may be largely overstated. Zaller highlights that despite the overwhelming negative coverage President Clinton received over his role in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Clinton received his highest approval rating at the end of the impeachment proceedings. To Zaller, this indicates that the negative coverage had a minimal impact on public opinion (Zaller, 1998).

Arceneaux & Johnson (2010) also find a limited effect on polarization from political cable news regarding public opinion. Rather, it seems that viewers and media consumers self-select partisan programs that they already agree with. When subjects were forced to consume content, they did not agree with, Arceneaux did not see an impact on opinion (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010). If the selective exposure hypothesis is true, this study would find a correlation between media consumption and public opinion, but this correlation would not be a causal one (Arceneaux et al., 2012).

## **Theories of Media Effects**

In contrast to Arceneaux et al. (1988), many scholars argue that the news media has an impact on public opinion. However, theories of media effects are not monolithic. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) argue that public opinion drives media coverage and the slant of the media is reflective of the attitudes and perspectives of media consumers. Unlike Gentzkow and Shapiro, Herman and Chomsky (2010) argue for what they call the propaganda model. This model argues that media firms have agendas and biases, and that all news go through what Herman and Chomsky call the “5 filters.” Among these filters, the most relevant to this study are the filters of “owners” and “advertisers.” The propaganda model posits that these filters, owners and advertisers, influence what news and stories media firms cover. Both theories conflict with the minimal effects hypothesis. However, this study is more closely associated with theories of media effects, which suggests the public opinion is moved by media firms, rather than the reverse.

## **Media and LGBTQ Coverage**

Previous studies have shown that media, such as newspapers, are more socially liberal regarding LGBTQ issues and influence their audiences to be more supportive towards LGBTQ issues (Chomsky and Barclay, 2010). The 2010 Chomsky and Barclay study finds that media institutions, such as *The New York Times* and *Wichita Eagle* are supportive of LGBTQ rights, regardless of the political positions of their audiences or of the region they are located in. This indicates that owners and not audiences, play a predominant role in determining whether media firms are supportive of LGBTQ rights. This finding contrasts significantly with the Gentzkow

and Shapiro study, which suggests that media views reflect the views of their audiences. This study found that support for LGBTQ issues increased as a result of their positive coverage. However, an additional study from Chomsky and Barclay (2013) finds that the owners of *The New York Times* actively suppressed stories about LGBTQ people until 1987, even though reporters believed that stories regarding LGBTQ people were newsworthy. While the 2010 study shows that slant has a real impact on public opinion, the 2013 study shows that slant is not defined by the readership or journalists, but rather, the desires of the owners. These studies: (1) conflict with the minimal effects hypothesis, (2) support the view that news organizations choose their slant in regards to coverage of LGBTQ stories, and (3) show that this slant has an impact on public opinion.

### **Other Factors that Impact Public Opinion**

The most relevant factor for this study would be the influence of the news media. Those who argue in favor of the minimal effect hypothesis may argue that other variables are influencing public opinion, and consumers are merely self-selecting their sources. This survey controls for other factors that have been shown to influence LGBTQ public opinion, such as political party membership (Pew Research Center, 2017) and religiosity (Whitley Jr., 2012). In addition, Hispanics are largely Catholic and are more likely to hold traditional religious values as opposed to non-Hispanic whites (Pew Research Center, 2017). Other studies have investigated media effects while controlling for these aforementioned factors that may mitigate media effects (Kull et al., 2004; Gilens, 2000).

This study also looks into the ideological differences between media sources, (i.e. liberal or conservative news). There is not sufficient research on the difference between new and

traditional media and how these outlets differ in their impact on culture, ideology, and politics. Specifically, this study looks at the impact on public opinion towards LGBTQ people.

There has been plenty of research done on LGBTQ people in regard to levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). Much of it shows that social support is a key reason for better mental health outcomes. This makes understanding what drives public opinion of key interests for those who care about the wellness of LGBTQ people, such as incidents that lead to the death of young LGBTQ people. (Kai, 2018).

### **Theoretical Argument**

Regarding theories of media behavior, this study is largely grounded in theories of media effects. The premise of this study investigates the impact of new media on public opinion. The 2010 Chomsky study suggests homogeneity among media outlets for traditional media outlets. This study does not make that assumption regarding new media and investigates the potential heterogeneity of media slants. Is there an anti-LGBTQ sentiment that exists more in new media sources than in traditional sources? Lange-Böhmer (2017) finds that social media is a unique bastion of conservative activity, with many of these conservative activists calling themselves "alt-right." This study's hypothesis is that individuals who get their news from social media may have more conservative positions on social views. It is also possible that social media and new media platforms are no different from traditional media in effect on public opinion. Ferris et al. have results that support this alternative explanation, finding that new media gets most of their information from traditional media sources, such as *The New York Times*. This study will test the difference in effect between new and traditional media on public opinion.



## CHAPTER III

### DATA AND METHODS

The subjects of the survey are young adults, male and female, all students of UTRGV. This can be seen as a limitation for the study's claims about the relationship between media consumption and public opinion for LGBTQ people in broader populations. This is a practical limitation, seeing that this study is self-funded, and large-scale survey distribution was not an option. While the population studied is largely homogeneous in terms of their age, ethnicity and politics, the study finds some variation in opinion in those surveyed. The recruitment methods are the following: flyers were posted around the UTRGV campuses in Edinburg and Brownsville, and advertisements were posted on student Facebook groups. When advertised online, the flyer was accompanied with a scripted post. Faculty in the social sciences departments were emailed to request permission to do presentations in classrooms to promote the survey. Students responded to ads through phone and email. All respondents signed a consent form at the beginning of the survey. Responses to the survey were anonymized. The survey was distributed by Qualtrics hosted by UTRGV.

This study is cross sectional in nature and uses a representative sample during a specific set of time. This study collected data through a survey from January 20th to May 5th of 2019. My survey consists of two main sections. They are the following: demographics and public opinion.

Using Software Statistics and Data Science (STATA), this study looks for significant correlations with the findings that the survey obtained. The hypothesis of the study suggests that these correlations theoretically show a relationship between media consumption and views toward LGBTQ people.

Ultimately, this study had a sample size of over 394 student participants that submitted usable data. In order to compare these variables from the raw data collected in the survey, certain questions in the survey were redefined to be measured in a regression analysis. After seeing what forms of media respondents are exposed to, this study analyzed their views on LGBTQ people.

The first section of the survey dealt with the demographics of the survey respondents and includes the independent variables of the study. The demographics section includes gender, race, sexual orientation, perceived economic class, religiosity and the subject's political views. Most notably, the survey asks what the subject's most used media source is. Religiosity is measured by how often the respondents pray and go to church and are measured using an ordinal scale. The question on gender asks what the respondents gender identity is. The sexual orientation question asks the respondents to categorize as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or other. The question on race simply asks respondents to choose between a selection of racial categories. The other variables use more subjective measures. Since many students do not have an income, this study used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status as a measure of a student's perceived economic class. Subjective social status has been demonstrated to be as effective in predicting health outcomes when compared to objective measures (Ostrove, et al., 2000). In addition, because all the respondents to the survey are students, many of them do not have an income, or have an accurate assessment of their parents' income. Students are asked to rank themselves from a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the "poorest" and 10 being the "wealthiest." The students

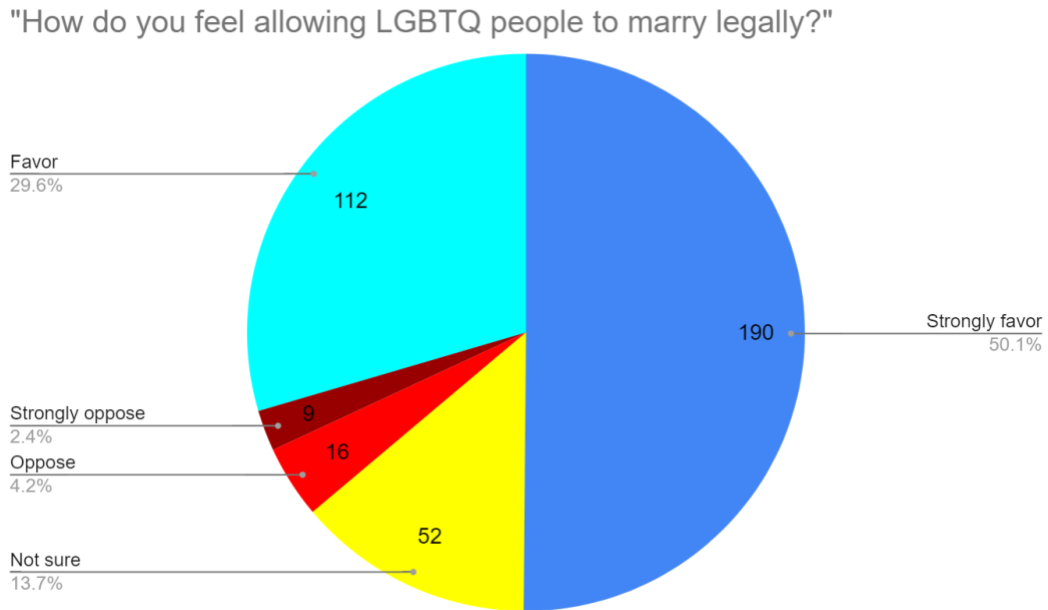
political views are measured by their own ideological identity. Students must rank themselves as being conservative, moderate, or liberal. All of these control variables are feasible alternative explanations for media effects. According to Pew, both racial and ethnic identity are correlated with conservative views on sexuality, as well as levels of religiosity, education and age (Pew Research Center, 2017). Women are also more likely to support gay marriage compared to men (McCarthy, 2019).

The second section of this survey is made of three questions and investigates the dependent variable of this study, public opinion. The questions are the following:

3. How do you feel allowing LGBTQ people to marry legally?
4. How do you feel allowing a small business owner to refuse to provide products/services to LGBTQ people, if doing so violates their religious belief?
5. How do you feel about laws that would protect LGBTQ people from discrimination in jobs/public accommodations/housing?

To answer these questions, the respondents rated themselves as being strongly favorable, favorable, not sure, opposed, and strongly opposed. In this survey, 79.7 percent of respondents rated themselves as “strongly agree” or “agree” to the question of LGBTQ people having the right to marry legally. The survey also found that 6.6 percent of respondents rated themselves as “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to the question. This is reflected in Figure 1.

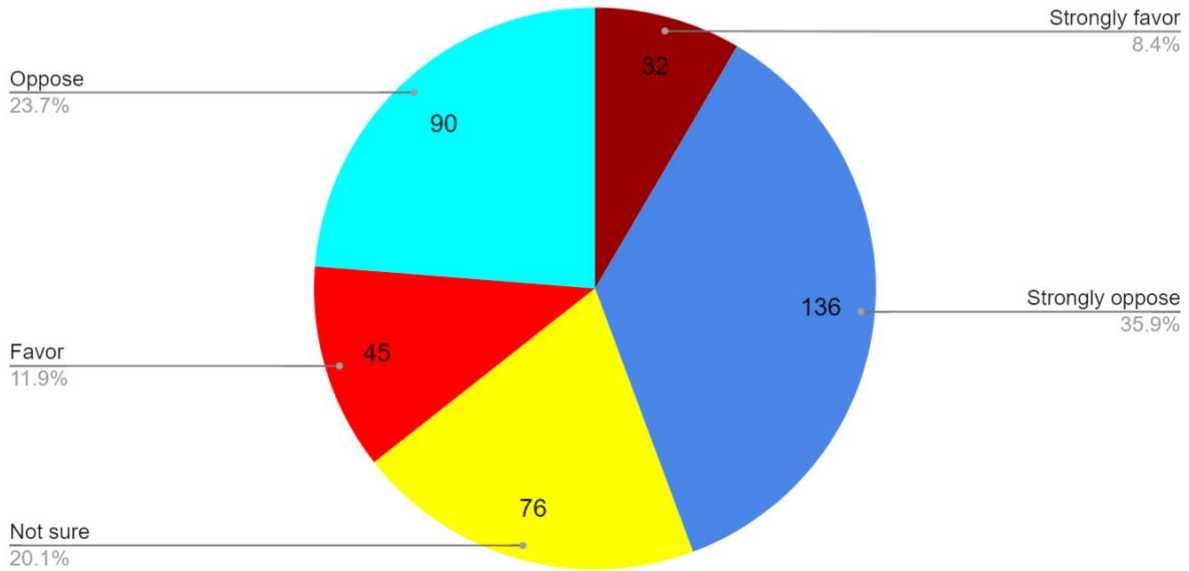
Figure 1: Gay Marriage Approval Rate



Moreover, the survey found that 67.7 percent of respondents rated themselves as “strongly opposed” or “opposed” to the question of whether businesses should have the right to refuse service to LGBTQ people. This survey found that 20.3 percent of respondents rated themselves as “favorable” or “strongly favorable” to the question. This is shown in Figure 2.

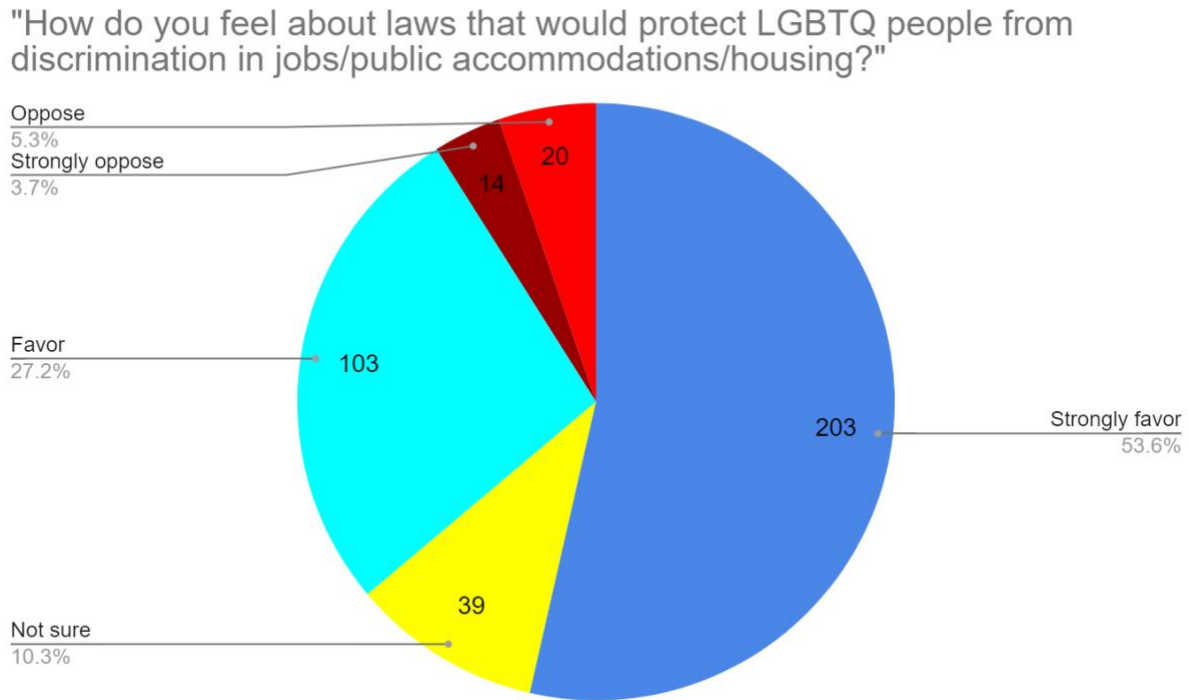
Figure 2: Public Opinion on the Right for Business to Refuse Service to LGBTQ People

"How do you feel allowing a small business owner to refuse to provide products/services to LGBTQ people, if doing so violates their religious belief?"



In the third question, 80.8 percent of respondents rated themselves as “strongly favorable” or “favorable” to the creation of anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ people. The survey found that 9 percent of respondents rated themselves as “strongly opposed” or “opposed” to the question. This is reflected in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Public Opinion on Anti-Discrimination Laws



These three questions function as the dependent variables in this study as a method of measuring public opinion towards LGBTQ people. The main independent variable this study examines is the type of media the respondents consume. In the survey, the respondents select from four options of news media sources. The first three can be what is referred to as traditional forms of media. These are newspapers, television news, and radio news. The last option the survey takers can select is internet web pages, which indicates the respondent predominantly consumes new media. However, this alone is not enough to determine what kind of media the survey taker consumes. Therefore, the respondent also needs to indicate their primary source of news in an open-ended response. This is necessary because many respondents say their news comes from internet web pages, but obtain their news from CNN. This is a common occurrence in the survey. When classifying which news media sources are “new” or “traditional,” it is important to

acknowledge that many individuals acquire their news online from traditional news sources, such as CNN or *The New York Times*. Both of these heavily recognized sources have their own website and can be accessed online. If an individual obtains all their news from BBC online, they are still consuming traditional news. Figure 4 shows the self-reported media sources of the survey takers. This figure is adjusted with the information from the open-ended response questions. The figure shows that a majority of respondents, 58.9 percent, reported their most common source of media as being from a news source that is solely online.

Figure 4: Percent of New Media versus Traditional Media

### Traditional vs New Media

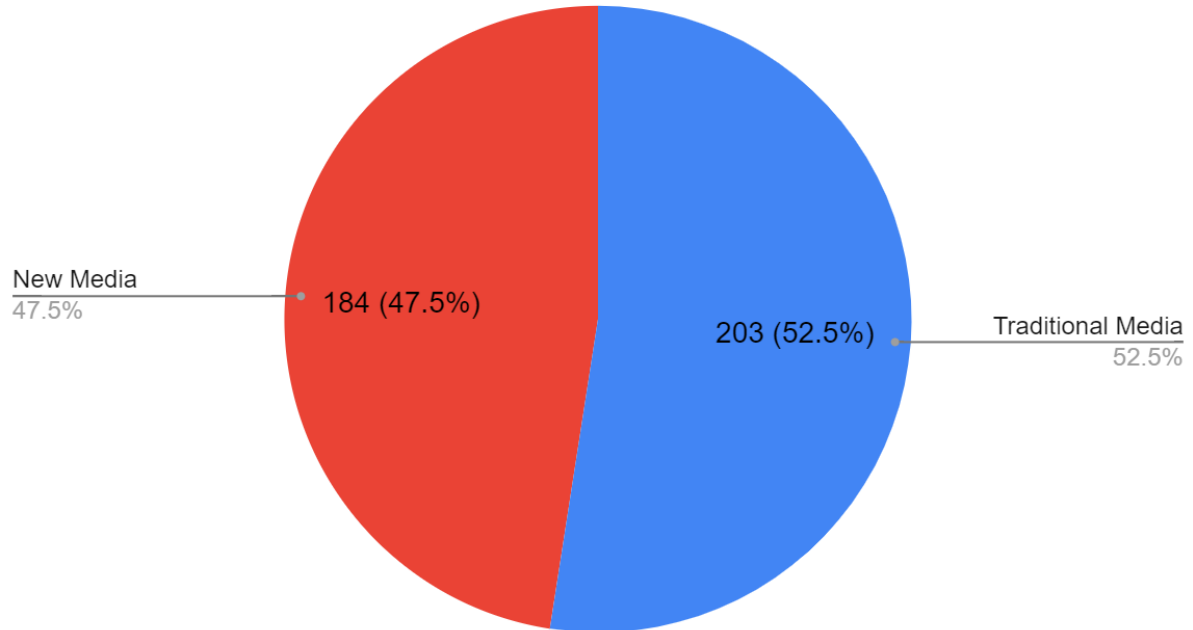
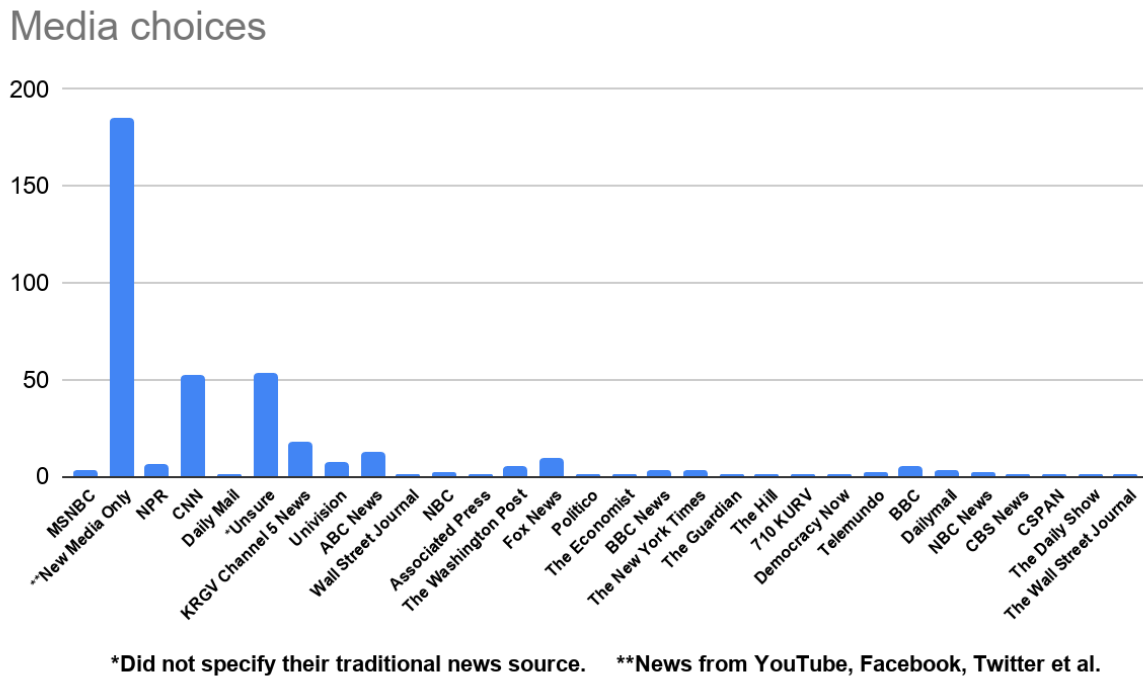




Figure 5: Media Choices

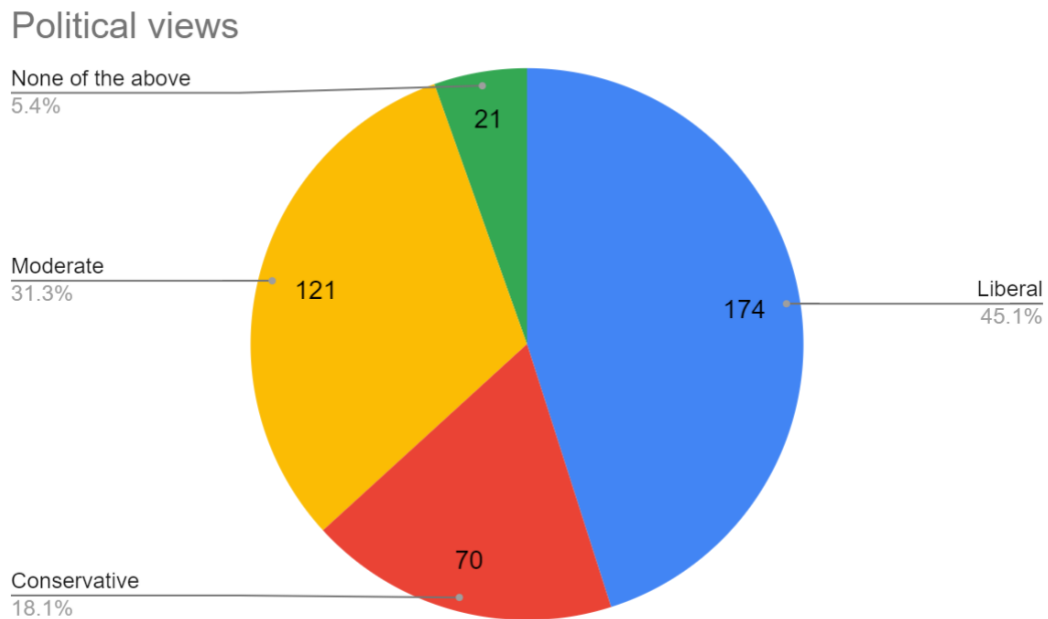


The other independent variables in this study are varied in order to capture possible additional explanatory variables. These control variables are: perceived economic class, racial/ethnic identity, sexuality, political ideology, gender, levels of religiosity, age, education level, and the political position of the respondents family.

The survey did not produce a large sample of racial and ethnic groups that are non-Hispanic. Because of this limitation this study operationalized the race and ethnic identity by creating two categories in the variable: Non-Hispanic white (0) and people of color (1). Gender is defined as male identifying respondents and female identifying respondents. This survey did not collect a significant sample of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Political ideology is measured by three categories: conservative, moderate, liberal. The survey also asks respondents to rate the political ideology of their family, who represent the students agents of

socialization. The results from the respondents self-rated political ideology can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Political Views



The religiosity variable is measured by a variety of survey questions. These questions ask how often respondents pray, how often the respondents go to church, and what religion, if any, the respondents identify with. Regarding sexuality, the respondents have the option of selecting a variety of common labels to describe sexual identity, along with a “some other sexuality” option. In regards to how this study codes sexuality, this study simply codes heterosexual and cis gendered = 0, and queer = 1. In this context queer is defined as one who does not have a normative gender or sexual experience or expression. Lastly, the survey also has a measure of education and age of the respondents as alternative explanations for the dependent variables. For age, the respondents merely report their age. For education, the survey takers need to choose

between the freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior, or graduate categories. All of these control variables are plausible theoretical explanations to explain change in public opinion

### Results

These variables are compared using an ordered logistic regression analysis. This study has one regression analysis for each three dependent variables. The results from the first regression analysis can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Regression 1

Gay Marriage (Regression I)	Standard Error	Z	P> Z
New Media	0.2921208	1.24	0.216
Gender	0.2705101	-2.09	0.036
Political Views	0.2262262	4.84	0
Parents Views	0.181404	-0.32	0.747
Perceived Class	0.4202021	-1.13	0.257
Religiosity	0.140309	-2.76	0.006
Sexuality	0.4749748	-2.77	0.006
Age	0.2448867	-0.06	0.952
Education	0.3220431	1.2	0.231

Regression I finds 2 variables to have statistical significance to levels of support towards gay marriage. However, this model finds no statistical significance between those who consume new media and support for legalized gay marriage when controlling for the other variables in the model. The results from the second regression can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Regression 2

The Right to Refuse Service (Regression II)	Standard Error	Z	P> Z
New Media	0.2568475	0.14	0.887
Gender	0.3312483	0.77	0.443
Political Views	0.1814151	-2.61	0.009
Parents Views	0.1550209	-0.82	0.41
Perceived Class	0.2857533	-0.31	0.755
Religiosity	0.1255644	0.03	0.973
Sexuality	0.3692891	1.98	0.048
Age	0.22506	-0.9	0.371
Education	0.3181794	-1.43	0.151

The second regression analysis is focused on support for businesses to be able to refuse service to LGBTQ individuals. The results for the second regression is consistent with the first. This regression did not find a relationship between new media consumption and support for businesses to be able to refuse service to LGBTQ people, when controlling for the other variables. The last regression can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression 3

Anti-Discrimination Laws (Regression III)	Standard Error	Z	P> Z
New Media	0.2814214	1.48	0.138
Gender	0.3274807	-1.1	0.27
Political Views	0.2125983	3.16	0.002
Parents Views	0.1871173	-0.97	0.334
Perceived Class	0.3637263	-1.22	0.223
Religiosity	0.12876	-0.03	0.975
Sexuality	0.4101842	-1.33	0.184
Age	0.2181747	-0.86	0.39
Education	0.3420565	0.8	0.421

The third regression analysis is done on the third measure of public opinion in the study. The analysis finds no significant relationship between new media consumption and the support of anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ individuals, when controlling for the other variables. A table containing the results from all the regressions can be seen in Table 4. Table 5 contains a table of summary statistics.

Table 4: Regression 4

Regression IV	Gay Marriage	The Right to Refuse Service	Anti-Discrimination Laws
New Media	0.36	0.04	0.42
Gender	-0.57**	0.25	-0.36
Political Views	1.09***	-0.47***	0.67***
Parents Views	-0.06	-0.13	-0.18
Perceived Class	-0.48	-0.09	-0.44
Religiosity	-0.39***	0	0
Sexuality	-1.31***	0.73**	-0.54
Age	-0.01	-0.2	-0.19
Education	0.39	-0.46	0.28

Table 5: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Min	Max
Gay Marriage	387	4.234694	1	5
The Right to Refuse Service	387	2.163265	1	5
Anti-Discrimination Laws	387	4.270408	1	5
New Media	387	1.524548	1	2
Gender	387	1.27551	1	3
Political Views	387	2.229592	1	3
Parents Views	387	1.846939	0	3
Perceived Class	387	4.234694	0	3
Religiosity	387	2.591837	1	4
Sexuality	387	1.780612	0	2
Age	387	1.505102	0	3
Education	387	1.647959	1	2

All the regressions found no significance between new-media consumption and public opinion. In contrast, political ideology plays a significant role in all of these regressions. It is likely that political ideology is functioning as a proxy for views of gay rights. When run without political ideology as a variable, new media is still not significant in these regressions. The results are the same when running the numbers through a t-test analysis, with new media consumption shown to not be significant.

### **Discussion**

Assuming the findings in this study reflected the population surveyed, this study suggests interesting implications about the impact of media from the propaganda model perspective. It is possible that traditional media that conservatives consume is more conservative than new media that conservatives consume. This would account for the mixed findings seen on Table 5 and Table 6 in regards to how the media impacts conservatives' views on public opinion.

Table 5, Table 6 and Table 7 may tell an interesting story about the Gentzkow and Shapiro model (2006). Rather than media having an agenda based impact on levels of public opinion for LGBTQ people, it is possible that all of these media sources are self-selected. To investigate this phenomenon, this study recommends a reversal of the independent and dependent variables used in this survey. Public opinion would be the independent variable, and the dependent would be the types of media individuals self-select. This study finds no evidence of new media having alternative effects compared to traditional media. Rather, this study finds that new media is effectively the same as traditional media concerning their impact. This is consistent with the findings found in Ferris et al. (2017).

## Conclusion

Based on the data collected, and the results from the ordered logistic regressions, the key findings include:

6. New media consumption is not shown to be determining public opinion for LGBTQ individuals.
7. Sexual identity, religiosity, and political ideology play larger roles on opinion on LGBTQ issues.
8. Religiosity of the respondents make it more likely for an individual to be against gay marriage but has little impact on other areas of public opinion for LGBTQ people.
9. Political ideology is the most dominant of the dependent variables in relation to public opinion for LGBTQ individuals.
10. Hispanic, particularly young Hispanics were overwhelmingly supportive of LGBTQ rights.

While many scholars found that media has an impact on public opinion, this study was aimed on the differences in coverage between new and traditional media. This study's hypothesis was not born out through the results of the survey. Additional research is necessary to elaborate on the exact causal relationship between media, political ideology, and public opinion to LGBTQ people.

This study had some key limitations. For one, this study is done solely at UTRGV. The study potentially has issues of external validity because of this. The population of UTRGV is demographically and ideologically different from the general population of the Rio Grande Valley, the United States, and of other universities. Future research pertaining to this topic could



potentially include a focus group that looks into other communities outside of universities and testing the impact of different types of media to ideology. Qualitative face-to-face interviews may also be of particular help. This would allow researchers to be able to ask to follow up questions to flush out the reasoning and rationale behind why individuals choose new or traditional media, and how these forms of media impact their levels of public opinion.

In addition, this survey had a very small sample of conservatives. The sample is small enough that it may not be representative of the population of conservatives at UTRGV. There is also a very small sample of LGBTQ people at UTRGV. This sample may also be too small to be representative. This study is also only a snapshot of how students feel in the spring of 2019. A time series analysis would tell a larger and more complete story about these relationships.

In order to properly tell the story of media impact on public opinion, this study recommends a mixed methods approach that combines survey research of this type with the aforementioned qualitative interviews. This survey asks respondents to list, in an open-ended fashion, their most common news source. Future surveys in this topic should also include a measure asking the respondents to select most commonly used news media outlets from a list of new and traditional news sources, similar to the methods used by Kull, Ramsey and Lewis (2003). This would provide a more objective and easier method to code and test media choice among respondents in a survey. It is also possible that this data suffers from an unseen conditional indirect effect. Perhaps it is possible that new media has a larger impact when measured with mediator variables. Overall, it is my opinion that the impact of new media is under theorized in political science research. Understanding the impact of Russian disinformation and alt-right activism in social media is still important. While this study finds no impact from new media in this sample, it is possible that changes to this study's research design

would capture the impact. There could be more variation in media effects online or greater variation in public opinion on different issues. Further research needs to be done to look at new media effects on other areas of public opinion, such as race, feminism, and transgender rights.

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