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MyElectionDecision.Org:

Supporting Students' Political Decision-making through Information
Technology to Increase Their Understanding of the Issues and Probability of
Voting in the 2008 Presidential Primaries and General Election

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Abstract

In response to reports of diminished consumption of traditional news media by young adults and relatively poor levels of student participation in elections, we developed a web site-based intervention that uses information technology in different academic and other settings that will contribute, potentially, to more effective decision making by college student voters. MyElectionDecision.Org is an interactive web site created by a team of information scientists and web designers, psychologists, and political scientists at Lawrence University of Wisconsin and the University of California, Irvine.

MyElectionDecision supports prospective voters' decision-making about alternative candidates by helping them: (1) rate the importance of different issues; (2) assess their closeness to initially unnamed candidates' positions on a set of critical issues -- Energy, Iraq, Healthcare, Immigration, and Economic issues - - and then receive a weighted score telling them which candidate they support; and, (3) debate their evolving choices with peers in small electronic discussion groups. Voters who use web site-assisted political decision making technology are expected to have increased clarity as to their choices and have relatively high rates of voting behavior in the 2008 presidential primaries and general election. The web site is neutral as to candidates or party and is only concerned with the support of individual decisions in voting and their relation to voting behavior.

Problem

Educating citizens is both a founding tradition as well as a recent concern in higher education and there are several studies that report a decline in civic engagement and a loss of trust in politics by young people (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Students (18-24 year-olds) have a relatively lower participation rate in the political process than older voters. Based on election commission and census data, historical comparisons of this age group with the aggregate voting age public (VAP) indicate that young adults are 16 percentage points below in registration and nearly 18 points below in voting (O'Loughlin & Unangst, 2006). A Harvard study (Institute of Politics, 2000) concluded that many young voters have a "perceived lack of knowledge about the issues." Colby et al (2003) suggest that young people may not have yet developed "the capacity to interpret, judge, acquire knowledge of, and understand complex issues and institutions" (p. 99). According to researchers of voting decision making:

“...[C]ollege students will have less crystallized and political attitudes than people later in life, yet these attitudes provide the crucial inputs to political perception and judgment. Younger people almost by definition will have less experience with political matters, and, in virtually every domain, expertise develops with greater experience. Expertise is one of the most important factors in studying decision making, and the typical college student, who will have had the opportunity to vote in at most a single major national election, will not have had the opportunity to develop very much of it” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006, pp. 65-66).

To address these problems a number of web-based initiatives have been created to increase student engagement in the political process and voting in particular, such as, Rock the Vote, MoveOn.Com, Votematch, Declare Yourself, League of Women Voters, Citizen Change, Citizen Lab and many others.

Shea (2004) interviewed 805 local party leaders about youth mobilization. The consensus was that young people were disengaged from the political process. Among the reasons cited were deficient high school civics programs, negative campaigning and the poor quality of media reporting of elections. Party leaders agreed that Internet-centered activities might be necessary to reach young voters. Iyengar and Jackman (2004) studied incentives for youth participation in politics among students 16-29. In the 2002

gubernatorial election, the researchers provided CD multimedia "ebook" with a searchable database about each of the two major candidates. The CD included TV ads, broadcast interviews, party platform excerpts and the audio of their one debate (p. 4). The youth version of this CD, there was also one for adult voters, also included a rate your campaign IQ test and other quizzes and games. While not truly a random design, the experimental group of students who received the CD, and of voting age, exceeded turnout of a control group by 15 percentage points, showed more interest in the campaign, and expressed greater faith in the act of voting (p. 11). Iyengar and Jackson concluded that a "synthesis of entertaining games and substantive information is necessary for election handbooks to influence the development of civic attitudes among youth" (p. 9).

An investigation of student voting patterns showed that "the more college students discuss politics and current events outside of class, the more likely they are to vote" (Niemi, 2006). It was found that 88% of students who discussed politics on a near-daily basis voted on election day, whereas only 66% voted if they only had discussions a few times a month. In a recent experimental study White (2007) offered three student groups and a control group varying kinds of Internet-based information to determine whether information and levels of interaction predicted likelihood of voting. Students in the group with most contact with the instructor (highest level of interaction/stimulation) were more likely to vote than a control group. However, the group with the highest voter turnout received only information on "cool web sites" to visit. There was no significant effect in the group who had an active Webmaster spoon-feeding them information. In this study, however, even the most active group only received information and was not required to respond to or otherwise engage the information.

Model of Student Voter Decision-Making

Several studies of political decision-making have concluded that most voters consider candidates' positions on the issues, their personal qualities, and party affiliation as key determinants of their choices. Another perspective, which interacts with these predictors, is that confronted with decisions of great complexity, voters vary in how much information they are willing to weigh in making their decision. There is a school of thought that voters are "cognitive misers" in the face of complexity and seek shortcuts and reduced information sets on which to make their decisions (Taylor, 1981). Lau and

Redlawsk (2006) conducted experimental studies of voter decision-making and modeled four kinds of voters in this regard. The Model 1 voter “actively seeks out as much information as possible, about every available alternative...” (p. 8). The Model 2 voter relies disproportionately on party identification to influence their decision. Thus, information for this type of voter only serves to confirm predispositions. The Model 3 voter reduces information search to a few key attributes and tends to ignore everything else. The Model 4 voter is largely intuitive, restricts information search, and relies on political heuristics (stereotypes, schemas, etc.) to make decisions.

From a student voter education viewpoint, the Model 1 voter sets a high standard. This voter makes rational decisions “under conditions of full information” (Lau & Redlawsk, p. 75). We assume that information in this respect concerns both candidates’ positions on the issues and their personal qualities. The Model 2 voter does not seek to self-educate so much as to confirm pre-existing beliefs and relies too heavily on party identification. The Model 3 and Model 4 voters are too lazy, only seeking as little information as possible to make an easy decision. Given this range of models, it is clear that the Model 1 voter is an optimal type from an educational standpoint. Thus, our approach seeks to politically socialize young voters into Model 1 decision makers. While we have no evidence to support the claim that full informed rational choice voters are more likely to vote, there is no reason to suppose that the other models are superior.

Supporting the Development of Model 1 Rational Voters

The principal problem facing voters in primaries, particularly, is sorting through their positions on the issues as well as their perceptions of different candidates' personal qualities. It is assumed that young voters may be relatively poorly informed and, consequently, are confronted by a highly complex problem in deciding to whom they will give their votes. The complexity consists not only in knowing about where a large number of candidates stand (particularly during the primaries), but which issues they personally weigh more heavily, and what role personal qualities play in assessing candidates. While we will employ the ideal of the Model 1 voter, it is incumbent upon us to develop methods that will enable voters to cope with the heavy information demands of a fully informed decision-maker. It is further assumed that voters will prefer those candidates whose positions on the issues most closely match, or fit to, their own

preferences. However, other important information contributing to their decisions will be their ratings of candidates' personal qualities and traditional predictors such as party affiliation. *Our aim is to increase the relative importance of issue-based decision making.*

Drawing on a study of voter decision making in a primary election (Williams, *et al.*, 1976), we will employ a summative averaging model in which "the final evaluation of a candidate is the sum of the weighted evaluations of each of the relevant issue positions and/or attributes" (pp. 38-39).

MyElectionDecision.Org

MyElectionDecision.Org will serve as an active web site that helps prospective student voters and other voters to develop a deeper understanding of candidates' positions on the issues that will be useful to them for making informed voting decisions in the primary and presidential elections. Commencing in October 2007, the web site will use a series of interactive questionnaires and electronic discussions to obtain students' ratings on critical issues in the coming campaigns as well as develop their arguments about their preferred candidate(s) in discussions with other voters. We also hope to attract other voters to our web site to help in their decision making.

Voter Decision Making Software

The principal tool of MyElectionDecision is decision-making software using computer displays of text information that support young voters' understanding of the relative importance of different issues and their decision making concerning different candidates' positions on the issues. The intent of the software is to help prospective voters arrive at unbiased decisions, cope with high information demands, and support their argumentation on behalf of preferred candidates.

While not based on Lau and Redlawsk's (2006) experimental approach, we note that their important studies also employed computer-based information in attempting to understand dynamic decision-making (using simulated candidates), that is, how voters' decisions were altered under conditions of programmed but self-selected political information.

Improving Decision Making in the Presidential Primaries and General Election

Phase 1. Ratings of Issues Priorities and Feedback on Closeness to Candidates: A computer presented *Survey* elicits participating voters' priorities for 5 issues in the

campaign that were judged important to young voters, particularly: Energy; Iraq war; Healthcare; Immigration; and, Economic issues. Following, Likert-scale questions ask potential voters to rate their endorsement of statements on the issues advocated by the principal unnamed candidates from both national political parties. The policy statements are drawn principally from the candidates' campaign web sites, or recent speeches in a few cases, but without attaching candidates' names. The rationale for this approach is to enable voters to determine how close they are to candidates, but on the issues alone, without biasing their decision by any presuppositions they may have about the candidates or their parties. After submitting the responses, voters receive a profile analysis telling them which candidate they support on each issue and overall candidate of choice based on all the issues.

Phase 2. Structured Discussions of Alternative Candidates. Participating voters will be randomly assigned to *electronic discussion groups*. Participants will engage in 5 discussion groups, covering each of the 5 issues

The same tools will be used in the general presidential election.

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