

Triangulating hostile media and projection effects on political participation

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ABSTRACT

This project aims to advance theories of presumed influence through an examination of the relationships between perceptions of self, public, and media ideology. Individual perceptions about public opinion and mass media content can influence the ways in which a person participates in politics. Communication researchers have built a large body of literature on the hostile media effect, the projection effect, and the influence of presumed influence. Disparate theories of the influence of these effects on political behavior have emerged. For example, the theory of corrective action suggests that, in response to the hostile media effect, individuals may feel the need to “correct” a perceived “wrong” in the public sphere through online political messaging. The theory of presumed influence suggests that distorted ideas of media influence on other people can affect behavior. Finally, research on projection has tried to link the perceptions of public opinion to voting behaviors. Some scholars have noted these effects are probably inter-related. Therefore, a unified approach to the study of perceived media and public ideology seems justified. This study will attempt to move toward such an approach by examining the relationships between the hostile media effect and the projection effect and their relationships with political behaviors. To do so, we will use structural equation modeling (SEM) to map the social-psychological processes of how perceptions of media-self and media-public differences are formed, as well as how those perceptions translate to political behaviors. Projection and hostile media effects will be treated as intervening variables between mass media exposure and political participation. Previous research examining the hostile media and projection effects in a Colombian population has established opposite patterns with regard to ideological extremity and social network heterogeneity. These variables are positively associated with the hostile media effect, but negatively related to the projection effect. Preliminary descriptive inquiry with this data set revealed a strong positive association between perceived self-media and self-public difference. The larger the perceived difference between the self and the media is, the larger the perceived difference between the self and the public is. Further, these results mirror each other in terms of ideological direction (left/right). In other words, people who think they are to the right of the media also think they are to the right of the public, and the same is true for people on the left. This result indicates that the people who experience the hostile media effect tend to be on the ideological extremes, and they do not tend to project their opinion onto others because they know they are ideologically extreme. Put simply, in these data, the people who experience the hostile media effect are not the same people who project their opinions onto others. We expect, therefore, to be able to distinguish between these effects with antecedents such as ideological extremity and social network heterogeneity. The relationships between hostile media and participation and projection and participation are less clear. It seems plausible at least, that these effects might lead to different frequencies or different styles of political participation. This study relies on 2010 national survey data collected in 10 Colombian cities by the Universities of

Wisconsin and Externado de Colombia, as part of a biennial study of communication and political attitudes in Colombia. In Colombia, citizens are beginning to peacefully reengage in political processes in the aftermath of more than 50 years of violence. Colombia therefore provides a unique context to look at how polarized perceptions of media bias may affect the potential for a democracy to stabilize at a point in time when the nation is in flux. In studying perceptions of the media and the public, we are more fundamentally studying a snapshot of how perceptions of the media and the public relate to the ways in which people engage with a political process that is undergoing substantial change.

INTRODUCTION

People's behavior is highly influenced by what others think and do. Therefore, perceptions of social norms and prevailing public opinion constrain or promote certain social behaviors. When it comes to politics, perceptions of public opinion about an issue or a candidate can strongly affect a person's political behavior. For example, the belief that the majority of the public is on your side of an issue can motivate you to attend a protest or to vote for a particular candidate. Conversely, such a perception could give a person the false impression that electoral victory is assured, decreasing the chance that person turns out to vote.

But the matter becomes more complicated when one considers that the primary lens through which most people view public opinion is the media system. Because the media are presumed to be influential on other people's opinions, perceptions of media opinion can also shape political behavior. For example, the belief that the media are against you can create a sense of indignation that mobilizes you to participate in politics. Conversely, that perception could give you the false impression that you are in a political minority, which could make you less willing to express your opinion or to participate in politics.

The story potentially becomes even more interesting when one considers how perceptions of media bias and biased perceptions of public opinion might work together to influence political behavior. While academic research has shown a relationship between these perceptual effects, research has, to this point, largely fallen short when it comes to linking perceptions of media and public opinion to political participation. Furthermore, while research has shown that perceived media bias - termed the hostile media effect - and biased perceptions of public opinion - termed the projection effect - are related to public discussion, less research has connected these effects with political participation and voting.

This study attempts to fill that gap in the extant literature. Using path analysis, we examine the influence of the hostile media effect and the projection effect on political behaviors such as attending a political protest and voting. Drawing on a representative sample of Colombian adults, this study also extends and elaborates upon previous research conducted in Colombia by replicating antecedent and predictor variables while examining new participatory outcomes. In doing so, our hope is that this research lights the way forward for research seeking to show the relationships between perceptual effects and political behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hostile Media Effect

Research on the hostile media effect (HME) developed from research on social-psychological effects of information processing, such as the assimilation bias and the contrast effect, which suggest that pre-existing beliefs and attitudes influence the way people perceive messages and information (e.g., Allport, 1954; Campbell, 1967; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Lepper, 1980). The original HME study examined the reactions of individuals in pro-Israeli and pro-Arab student groups to the same news story about the Beirut massacre (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). The study shows that both sides perceived the article to be biased against their side, even while neutral observers rated the information as balanced. This clearly begs the question of how and why people on both sides of a political debate perceive bias in different directions. The authors called this phenomenon the hostile media effect, which they concluded is an effect of biased information perception and processing.

The subsequent body of literature on the hostile media effect is robust, and clearly demonstrates the presence of the effect across a variety of contexts and pertaining to a variety of

political issues (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Rojas, 2010; Tsfati, 2007). The HME literature has also demonstrated the central role political involvement. Involvement with an issue or group, strong partisan identification, or a strong political ideology moderates the HME (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, 1992; Schmitt & Gunther, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). In other words, people who are highly involved in politics are more likely to perceive media bias, and this happens on both sides of the political spectrum or of a political debate.

Another important factor is the perceived reach of the media (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). When people think that others will be exposed to a message, they are more likely to perceive hostility in the message. When others will likely not see the message, the assimilation bias takes hold, and people tend to see the agreeable information in the message rather than the disagreeable information. The idea of perceived reach of media content was later developed into a theory of “the influence of presumed media influence” (Gunther & Storey, 2003), which suggests that the presumed influence of media can affect an individual’s own political behavior.

While the HME was originally conceived as a reaction to a particular story or stimulus (Vallone et al., 1985), others have examined the effect at the media system level (e.g., Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Gunther et al., 2001; Rojas, 2010; Wojcieszak, 2010). At the media system level, the hostile media effect captures the respondents’ perceptions of bias in the media, as a whole. This research is concerned with the system level of the HME. Perceptions of “the media,” as a whole, may shape the ways in which people participate in politics. In other words, people may assume that others have been influenced by the “biased” media, and this may motivate them to participate in politics.

Wojcieszak (2010) studied the system-level hostile media effect in a Colombian sample, and found that ideological extremity and political talk network heterogeneity positively predict the hostile media effect. The finding about ideological extremity makes intuitive sense, considering the robust body of literature showing the role of political involvement (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, 1992; Schmitt & Gunther, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). The stronger one's cognitive or emotional involvement with politics or an issue, the more likely one is to perceive bias in the news media. The finding about network heterogeneity is more groundbreaking, and it suggests that the more diverse views a person is exposed to, the more likely that person is to perceive an ideological slant in the media. This could be because more oppositional considerations are salient at the time of exposure to the media. Based on Wojcieszak's (2010) findings, this study expects to find positive relationships between ideological extremity and the hostile media effect, as well as network heterogeneity and the hostile media effect (see Figure 1, for summary of hypotheses in theorized model).

H1: Network heterogeneity will be positively related to the hostile media effect.

H2: Ideological extremity will be positively related to the hostile media effect.

Projection Effect

The projection effect is the phenomenon in which people tend to overestimate the degree to which the public agrees with their opinion about a political issue (Gunther et al., 2001; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Ross, Green & House, 1977). Sometimes called the "looking glass effect" (Fields & Schuman, 1976), the "false consensus effect" (Mullen & Hu, 1988), or "pluralistic ignorance" (Gunther & Chia, 2001), the projection effect refers to the tendency for people to assume that other people think as they do. Marks and Miller (1987) identify several

possible theoretical mechanisms for the projection effect, including selective exposure, the salience of issue position, and ego-defense. Subsequent evidence regarding these competing explanations is mixed, at best (Christen & Gunther, 2003).

The role of political involvement, attitude strength, or ideological extremity is unclear. Fabrigar and Krosnick (1995) found no difference between partisans and non-partisans, while others have found that as opinions or attitudes about an issue grow stronger, the projection effect increases (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Martinez, 1988; Wojcieszak & Price, 2009). However, research conducted in Colombia shows a negative relationship between ideological extremity and projection (Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). In Colombia, at least, it seems that those who are more ideologically extreme know they are more extreme, and do not project their extreme positions onto the public at large. Given that this study uses survey evidence gathered in Colombia, we expect to find a negative relationship between ideological extremity and the projection effect. Findings from Colombia also show a negative relationship between political talk network heterogeneity and the projection effect (Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). Those who are exposed to more diverse points of view in political talk are less likely to project their own opinions onto others. Therefore, this study also expects to find a negative relationship between these variables.

H3: Ideological extremity will be negatively related to the projection effect.

H4: Network heterogeneity will be negatively related to the projection effect.

The relationship between the projection effect and the hostile media effect is also unclear. Gunther & Christen (2002; 2003) as well as other studies (Gunther et al., 2001) have found evidence that the projection effect and the hostile media effect work together to influence perceived public opinion. Other studies, however, did not find a relationship between HME and

projection (Huge & Glynn, 2010). In a Colombian sample, Wojcieszak (2010) found opposite predictive patterns with regard to ideological extremity and network heterogeneity. It makes sense, therefore, that these variables might work together to influence political participation in Colombia.

Hostile Media Effect, Projection Effect, and Political Participation

This study extends the work of Wojcieszak (2010) by linking the hostile media effect and the projection effect to interpersonal and interactive forms of participatory political engagement. Several strands of research have attempted to link the hostile media effect to political participation. Some have shown that HME can result in a spiral of silence effect that could limit public participation (Tsfati, 2007). Others have shown that HME can lead to indignation and political discussion (Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008). Another strand of research argues that HME leads people to “correct” perceived “wrong” in the public sphere by expressing themselves through new media technologies (Rojas, 2010) or in political talk (Barnidge, 2012). These acts of political expression can, in and of themselves, mobilize people to participate in politics (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Yet, these research studies do not examine “high commitment” forms of political participation, which requires not just expressive involvement online, but also requires on-the-ground, physical attendance to political meetings and events. This study therefore seeks to break new ground by uncovering the relationship between the HME and high commitment political participation.

RQ1: What is the relationship between the hostile media effect and political participation?

Research in political science has long-attempted to link the projection effect to voting behavior. The literature generally shows that the projection effect can influence strategic or

tactical voting – whereby people vote for a less-than-perfect candidate to prevent an even less desirable candidate from winning (e.g. McAllister & Studlar, 1991). Conover & Feldman (1982) found that the projection effect can cause people to overestimate the degree to which their favored candidate agrees with their positions, and this misperception increased support for that candidate. Other studies show evidence of a bandwagon effect (e.g., Skalaban, 1988), whereby people tend to vote for the candidate they think is in the lead. However, some studies have failed to show significance effects of projection on voting (e.g., Krosnick, 1990). Further, little research has examined the link between the projection effect and other forms of political participation. This study therefore attempts to revive the examination of the effects of projection on political participation, and extend that examination to include forms of political participation other than voting.

RQ2: What is the relationship between the projection effect and political participation?

Context of the Study

This study uses data from a national representative sample of Colombian adults in urban areas. Colombia's history of violence and polarizing politics has resulted in a decline in trust in the federal government and democratic processes, and the rise of efforts to promote transparency and responsiveness in local government, particularly in urban areas (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). In Colombia, citizens are beginning to peacefully reengage in political processes in the aftermath of more than 50 years of political and drug-related violence. Colombia therefore provides a unique context to look at how the hostile media and projection effects may affect the democracy at a point in time when the nation is in flux. In studying perceptions of the media and the public, this research more fundamentally studies a snapshot of how these perceptions relate to political engagement during a moment of substantial change.

DATA

This study relies on national survey data collected between July 29 and August 20, 2010 in 10 cities in Colombia, by the Universities of Wisconsin and Externado de Colombia, as part of their biennial study of communication and political attitudes in Colombia. The sample was designed to represent Colombia's adult urban population – 76% of Colombia's 44.5 million inhabitants live in urban areas. Survey respondents were selected using a multi-step stratified random sample procedure that selected households randomly, based on city size and census data. Once the number of households was allocated for a given city, a number of city blocks were selected randomly according to housing district and strata. Then, individual households were randomly selected within each block. Finally, the study used the “adult in the household who most recently celebrated a birthday” technique to identify an individual respondent at random. Up to three visits to each household were made (if needed) to increase participation in the survey. A local professional polling firm, Deployectos Limitada, collected the data and 1,064 face-to-face completed responses were obtained for a response rate of 85%.

METHODS

Path analysis was used to test the hypotheses and research questions outlined above. (See Figure 1 for the complete theoretical models.) With the exception of the last variable in the path diagram, whether the respondent voted in the first round of the Colombian presidential election (yes=1 and no=0, with 64% reporting that they voted), all of the variables used in the analysis are constructed variables drawing on multiple questions from the original survey. Cases that had

missing values for variables used in the analysis were dropped, and that left 866 cases for analysis.

The ideological extremity variable was constructed by folding a 10-point scale based on respondents' rating of their own ideology, 0 being left, 10 being right, and 5 being centrist. The mean and standard deviation of the resulting variable are 1.95 and 1.74. The variable for the projection effect was constructed by computing the absolute value of the difference between two questions, one reflecting the respondent's estimate of the ideology of the Colombian public and the other reflecting the respondent's estimate of their own ideology (the same variable used for computing ideological extremity). Both originating questions were based on 10-point scales reflecting the same left-right organization described above for the self-ideology scale, and the mean and standard deviation of the resulting variable are 1.36 and 1.83. Similarly, the hostile media effect (HME) was computed by taking the absolute difference of respondents' estimates of their own ideology and the ideology of the Colombian media. The mean and standard deviation of the resulting variable are 1.57 and 1.98.

The engagement variable was computed as an additive scale based on five separate yes-or-no questions reflecting the respondent's various types of involvement. The types of participation gauged by the original questions included whether in the past year the respondent had volunteered for a political party or attended a rally, city meeting, city council meeting, or protest. The Cronbach's alpha for the resulting scale is .703, and the mean and standard deviation are .55 and 1.05.

Finally, the network heterogeneity variable was constructed along the same lines as a similar variable used in the study by Wojcieszak (2010), who was working with the 2008 dataset produced by the same organization that produced the 2010 set used in this study. Respondents

were asked three separate questions, all on scales from 1-5 (1 being never and 5 being frequently), gauging how often they speak with people of the left, of the right, and of a different social class from their own. If a respondent rated their own political ideology as being to the left of center, their answers concerning how often they spoke with people of the left were recoded as zero, and likewise for people who labeled themselves as being to the right. (People who rated themselves as centrists had no responses recoded.) After performing this recoding, the three scales were averaged to compute a single scale for network heterogeneity, and the mean and standard deviation of the scale are 1.46 and 1.17.

RESULTS

The results of the path analysis are shown in Figure 1 along with the indirect effects mentioned below. H1 hypothesized that network heterogeneity would be positively related to HME, and indeed that effect was positive and significant at better than a $p < .001$ level. H2 stipulated that ideological extremity would be positively related to HME, and that was also supported at a $p < .001$ level.

H3 stated that ideological extremity would be negatively related to the projection effect, but this was not supported by the results. It turned out that the relationship is positive at a $p < .001$ level. Similarly, H4 hypothesized that network heterogeneity would be negatively related to the projection effect, but that relationship turned out to be positive as well, at a $p < .01$ level.

RQ1 asked what relationship exists between HME and political participation, and this analysis suggests a positive relationship in two ways. HME was positively related ($p < .001$) with the engagement scale but not significantly related to whether respondents voted in the

presidential election; however, HME did have a significant indirect effect on voting through the engagement variable ($p < .01$).

RQ2 asked what relationship exists between the projection effect and political participation, and those results run parallel to RQ1. The projection effect had no significant direct relationship with voting but did have a positive effect on the engagement scale ($p < .001$), and the projection effect had a positive indirect effect on voting through the engagement variable ($p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study travel a long ways in terms of describing the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. As expected, political talk network heterogeneity and ideological extremity are positively related to the hostile media effect. Contrary to expectations, however, the antecedent variables are also positively related to the projection effect. These are surprising results given previous research conducted in Colombia, which found a negative relationship between network heterogeneity and projection, as well as between ideological extremity and projection (Wojcieszak, 2010).

One reason for the discrepancy between previous research and our study could be difference in the samples. Wojcieszak (2010) relied on survey data collected in 2008, while this study relies on data collected two years later as an extension of the same project. A second explanation for the difference between the studies, of course, is that there has been a real shift in the Colombian population. This explanation seems unlikely, however, given that little about the Colombian media system changed in the two years between the data collection for the studies.

The most likely explanation for the discrepancy is that the inclusion of the HME and the projection effect in the same model reverses the polarity of the relationship between the antecedent variables and the projection effect -- a phenomenon known as Simpson's paradox. While a negative relationship is seen in models without the HME variable (Wojcieszak, 2010), such models do not account for the effects of the antecedent variables on projection at every level of the HME. Therefore, our analytic model is preferable to models examining the projection effect as a dependent variable without the inclusion of the HME as a control variable, as it reflects a more accurate picture of the relationships between the variables.

The findings regarding the relationship between ideological extremity and the HME fit with a long line of HME research suggesting that political involvement in some form predicts or moderates the HME (e.g., Gunther, 1992; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994). The relationship between network heterogeneity and the HME also fits with previous research (Wojcieszak, 2010), but is less established in the literature, as a whole. One explanation for this relationship could be that encountering diverse views in political talk gives people a different picture of established public opinion than is offered in the media. Alternatively, exposure to differing points of view could cause a contrast effect (Campbell, 1967), where the individual's own political position is highlighted by disagreement. Under this explanation, political talk causes the individual's own position to remain salient when viewing or reading media content, as well, which results in a media-self contrast.

The most important contributions of this study, however, are the findings regarding political participation. The results show strong and direct positive effects of both the HME and the projection effect on political participation. Further, the participatory activities examined in this study require physical presence, in-the-flesh interaction with others, and a higher level of

political commitment than some other forms of participation - such as signing a petition or participating online. Therefore, it can be concluded from these results that the HME and the projection effect are positively related to highly-involved and time-consuming forms of political participation. These findings therefore mean that the media can have a large influence on political participation, but this could be because people react to a media system that "got it wrong" and not because people are directly persuaded by media messages. Combine the HME with the belief that "most people" think as they do, and people become more motivated to stand up for their beliefs at protests, rallies, and city meetings.

This study also makes an important contribution to the literature by uncovering indirect effects of the HME and the projection effect on voting. These effects are fully mediated by the engaged and time-consuming forms of political participation described above. It seems, therefore, that in Colombia the HME and the projection effects not only motivate people to take to the streets, but also to convert that political involvement into electoral participation. In Colombia, people who think the media are against them but the public is with them will not only attend protests and rallies; they will also turn out to the polls - at least in the first round of the two-stage Colombian elections. Normatively, these findings have important implications for the role of the media system in an election, as even ostensibly neutral media can have a substantial impact on election turnout. Furthermore, the results imply that perceptions of media bias may not have uniformly negative consequences for democracy, as higher levels of voter turnout can hardly be seen as bad.

This study faces the typical limitations of cross-sectional survey research. We cannot derive causal inferences from the model. Rather, we have examined a snapshot of relationships at a single point in time. Further limitations stem from the saturation of the model, as certain

relationships could not be tested. Finally, the face-to-face context of data collection could have prevented some respondents from answering the question about political ideology, as politics remains a sensitive subject of discussion in Colombia after more than 60 years of violence.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a substantial contribution to theories attempting to link the HME and the projection effect by examining the behavioral consequences of each. While previous studies have examined behavioral outcomes such as willingness to engage in political discussion (e.g., Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Tsfati, 2007), and other studies have linked the HME and projection (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001), fewer studies have examined the influence of these perceptual effects on political participation (see Rojas, 2010, for an exception). This research shows a significant and strong positive influence of both the HME and the projection effect on engaged political participation, and indirect effects on voting in elections. Therefore, this study helps lay a foundation for future research examining the link between media and public perceptions and political behavior.

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Figure 1:

