

EXTERNAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE VOTING BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG VOTERS: EVALUATION OF THE MEASUREMENT MODEL

Arne Baruca

The University of Texas-Pan American, 1201 W. University Drive, Edinburg, TX 78541
Phone (956) 381-7135
arne.baruca@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Young voters are very important as a target group, and therefore a better understanding of their voting behavior can help political campaigns develop a better communication strategy and thus, persuade more voters in elections. Based on the findings from the literature a model of the most influential external factors on voting behavior was proposed and tested to evaluate if it is applicable to measuring the voting behavior of young voters. The results of the study partially confirmed the model, suggesting more elaboration is needed in defining the potential influential factors on voting behavior of young voters.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the rate of people who can be classified as young voters in the USA increased from 42 million in 2006 to nearly 50 million in 2008 (US Census Bureau), representing almost one third of the total electorate. Therefore, they are a group that might play an important role in the forthcoming presidential elections. All of those who are classified as younger voters belong to the so called Y generation. There have been many studies addressing the problem pertaining to why young voters do not vote (Dermody & Lloyd, 2003, 2004) but little or no considerable study has been directed in researching the factors that influence the voting behavior of this specific group. Because of the importance of this specific group, understanding and explaining what shapes the voting decision of young voters represents a challenging issue.

As Gardner, Rees & Tsianti (2005) explained, many authors addressed the need for a more complex segmentation process in political campaigning. According to these authors political parties use “simplistic marketing and in particular a simplistic type of segmentation” (p.1162) and thus, they are not as effective as they would be using a more complex segmentation (Gardner, et al, 2005). Even if parties do customize the message, the basic message remains the same. Parties should be aware of the complexity of the possible voter. Since young voters represent almost a third of the total electorate they represent a very important research group.

According to the ANES* the factors that influence the voting decision can be in general divided into two broad categories: the internal and the external (ANES conference 2006). The internal factors influencing the decision depend on the individual psychological characteristics and cognitive and affective reactions to campaigning. The external factors can be broadly divided into three categories: (a) campaigning focused on influencing (advertisement, rallies, and endorsements), (b) events occurring in the country that are not influenced by campaigns (i.e.: economic issues, wars, etc.) and (c) the behaviors of people close to the voter. Besides the findings pointed out by ANES, several other different studies exist on what affects the voting decisions. Cutright and Rossi (1958) suggested that the voting outcome is an interplay between different factors. Those factors are the characteristics of candidates, the activities of the party organizations, the process of communication and influence, and the social and psychological characteristics of individual voters. Carreira (2007) tested the relevant factors for voting decisions during the Brazilian elections and found that the variables that turned out to be more frequent and significant were the voters' religion, party affiliation, the evaluations of the current government and the candidates' attributes. Little et al. (2007) investigated the affect of a more specific factor such as facial appearance on voting decision and found out that this factor indeed showed important effects on the choice of the candidate.

The study of the effects of internal factors demands a thorough understanding of the socio-behavioral characteristic of the Y generation. Moreover, a large amount of in-depth interviews is needed in order to achieve significance. Unfortunately, due to time limitations and budget constraints this is unlikely to be achieved. Therefore, the research will focus on the external factors that affect the voting decision of young voters.

Finding out which are the most important external factors that affect the decision of young voters is crucial for political campaigns in the process of segmentation. Once the external factors are identified political strategists will find it easier to organize and plan their campaigns accordingly. Therefore, the main research objectives (RO) of this study are the following:

RO1 - through prior research identify significant external factors influencing voting behavior

RO2 – Measure the proposed model of the identified external factors in order to discover if the model can be applied to young voters

To sum up, the purpose of the study is to test the measurement model of voting behavior on young voters who are believed to be different from other generations. Based on the findings from the literature a model of the most influential factors will be proposed and tested to see if it is applicable to measuring the voting behavior of young voters as well.

* American National Election Studies

LITERATURE REVIEW

What influences a voter in deciding who he or she is going to vote for has been studied for several decades now. All studies have shown very similar outcomes. One of the first studies in the field was conducted by Cutright and Rossi (1958) where they stated that the election outcome is a bundle of several factors; “the characteristic of the candidate, the activities of the competing party organizations, the processes of communications and the influence involving the mass media and informal groups, and finally, the social and psychological characteristics of individual voters” (p.171). Newman and Sheth (1985) tried to develop a model of voter behavior in primary elections. They summarized different schools of thought in an attempt to explain the voter behavior. The final model they proposed had seven domains that, according to them, drive the voter behavior. The identified domains were: (a) Issues and policies, (b) social imagery, (c) emotional feelings, (d) candidate image, (e) current events, (f) personal events, (g) epistemic issues. They concluded that the seven domains identified could probably be lower in the future elections, due to overlapping of some of the topics.

Singh, Leong, Tan and Wong (1995) developed a model to analyze voting behavior based on the theory of reasoned action that was developed by Fishbein (1980). Their model “incorporates personal qualities of candidates as attributes in attitude formation, the influence of party affiliation on voting tendencies, and the impact of subjective norms including personal and mass media factors” (p.38).

Carreiro (2007) studied and identified relevant factors for the voting decision in the 2002 Brazilian presidential election. The variables identified were “voters’ religion, their party sentiments, their positioning on the left-right scale, the evaluations they made of the sitting government and the candidates’ attributes, especially reliability and competence” (p. 90).

Based on findings from the above mentioned studies, four concepts were identified and are believed to have a crucial role as external factors in influencing the voters’ behavior:

- Attitudes toward the candidate – reliability, competence, likeability
- Attitudes toward the party of the candidate
- Process of campaigns communication – advertising, endorsements, rallies...
- Social influence from people close to the voters – family, friends, social networking...

Young voters

Previous research on young voters were mostly concerned in finding out why young voters disregard voting and politics in general. A study conducted by UCLA suggested that young voters do not vote in the presidential elections unlike older generations (2004). UCLA report (2004) also indicates that Harvard’s Institute of politics studies from 2000 and 2001 showed that the likelihood for young voters to vote depends on the trust they have in the federal government. Dermody and Harmer-Lloyd (2004)

suggested that young voters' attitudes toward politics are negative, distrustful and cynical. According to their research, the media and their negativism play an important role in creating more distrust, cynicism and low engagement. However, the last American presidential election in 2004 showed young voters as very involved ones, and according to the latest polls for the presidential election 2008 (Pew Research Voting Center, 2008) the trend is still increasing.

Therefore, campaigns need to stop simplifying their messages and must create their strategies in accordance with the latest trends. Segmenting needs to be done thoroughly, specifically when targeting youth needs. But the question is which are the major factors influencing the younger generation? Are the proven factors generalizable to them as well, or do they decide differently? They are used to fast changes, as noted, they are cynical toward authorities and usually do not plan ahead more than one year (Shapiro, 2008); moreover, they are for the most part resistant to advertising (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001).

Attitude toward the candidate

As Singh et al. (1995) observed "a political candidate is perceived as possessing a bundle of attributes or personal characteristics of varying importance to the voter. By performing a multiplicative summation of the importance of these attributes and their beliefs regarding the extent to which the candidate possesses them, voters' attitudes toward the candidate can be derived."(p.39). Therefore, we can say that personal qualities matter to the voter.

Attitudes toward the party of the candidate

Party affiliation also impacts voting behavior. It has been found to be a significant influence on behavior (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987: in Singh et al, 1995). Carreira (2007) also found party affiliation to be one of the most influential factors in voting behavior.

According to Dermody and Lloyd (2004) young people see politics as boring and irrelevant, and politicians as aggressive and dishonest. That is why young voters do not vote. So, if they like the candidate as a person, as in the case of Obama, a presidential candidate in the 2008 US presidential election, they will vote for him, no matter which party he is in. Therefore, it is proposed that voting behavior of young voters is affected by the attitude toward the candidate and by the attitude toward the party of the candidate.

The effect of campaign promotion

Young voters are said to be resistant to advertising (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2004). Their resistance implies that they can hardly be targeted by communication strategies. As Wolburg and (2004) explained, this is not the case if there is humor or irony in the commercial. In that case they might take the commercial into consideration (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski 2004). Also, as Jackson (2007) pointed out, young people

are significantly more likely to agree with a position when it is endorsed by a celebrity. Musicians are especially found to be highly persuasive. Unfortunately, for political candidates, the usual communication strategies adopted by their campaigns are far from being funny. Seriousness is the usual theme of the communication process. That is why it is proposed that the process of campaign communication hardly persuades young voters. Since the message is often too serious, young people disregard it. However, some campaigns do use funny commercial to persuade voters and therefore it is believed that the promotion strategies affect young voters as well.

Social influence

As Nickerson (2008) suggested, the entire voting process appears to be assisted by interactions with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members. Potential voters tend to rely on one another, encourage one another to go to the polls and encourage each other to support a particular candidate (Nickerson, 2008). Nickerson (2008) found strong evidence that interpersonal influence shapes the behavior of people living together. Even more so is in the case of young voters, especially with the raise of online communities where they exchange information with a lot of people on a daily basis. Therefore, it is proposed that social influence will play an important role in the voting behavior of young voters as it does for other generations.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The model that was presented in Figure 1 was tested through a survey that was collected at a university located in the southern region of the US. The sample was comprised of students attending that university. One hundred and twenty four subjects were provided with a survey instrument in form of a paper and pencil questionnaire where 59 items were measured. Measures included differential scales, Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 indicating agreement or disagreement, and other demographic data.

Out of 124 respondent 6 were removed due to irremediable missing data and two were removed due to the age which exceeded the upper limit of 31. Of the remaining 116 there were 60 females and 56 males with an age range from 20 to 31 years. The average age was 25.5 years old. In data analysis, first the reliability of the measurement scales will be estimated. Second, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will be used to test the construct validity of each of the constructs to evaluate the validity of the whole model.

Measures

For the purpose of our analysis four measurable variables were used. The four variables are *attitudes toward the candidate*, *attitude toward the party of the candidate*, *the effect of promotion and social influence*.

Attitudes toward the candidate (ATTCAN), was measured with nine seven-point semantic differential scales that measured a person's attitude toward a specific political candidate. Pinkleton (1997) tested the reliability of the scale and his result was .81. (Bruner, et. al 2001). To evaluate data we use the correlations matrix. Five variables that purely correlated with other variables in the scale were removed. The reliability of the new scale was now .86.

Insert Table 1 about here

Attitudes toward the party of the candidate (ATTPAR) was measured with eight seven-point semantic differential scales that measured a person's attitude toward the party. The scale was adapted from the scale that measured the attitude toward the offer developed by Burton and Linchenstein (1988). Again, correlation matrix was used to locate the variables that did not correlated well with other variables. Two of them were removed. The reliability of the new scale was .693, which was slightly below that of the suggested minimum of .7 (Hair, et all 2006).

The effects campaign promotion (PROM) was measured by a seven-item five point Likert-type summated rating scale that measured the degree to which a person expresses a positive attitude toward the promotion in general, particularly in the sense of it being credible and useful (Bruner, et al., 2001). I adopted the scale using a political candidate instead of a product and added four more items. Two variables were removed from the initial scale and the new five item scale reliability was .686. Again slightly below the suggested minimum of .7.

Influence by others (INFLU) was measured by a twelve-item, five point Likert-type scale that measures the degree to which a person expresses the tendency to seek information about candidates by observing others' behavior and asking for their opinions.(Bruner, et al., 2001). The same procedure for other constructs was used to reduce the scale. The new scale had five items with a reliability score .847.

RESULTS

Evaluating the goodness-of-fit criteria

As Table 2 shows, the Chi-square value was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. The Chi-square value was 230 with 66 degrees of freedom. The Chi-square value in CFA is preferred not to be significant in order to have a good model fit. However, according to Hair et al. (2006) the Chi-square test becomes less reliable when sample size is smaller than 250, especially if more than 12 variables are used. In the present studies 13 variables were used and the final sample size was 116. Therefore, other fit indices need to be evaluated as well.

The value of RMSEA, which is also an absolute fit index, was 0.082 was just slightly above the acceptable range of 0.08 for sample sizes below 250 cases and with 12 or more variables. That means that the model fit could still be acceptable. Hence, evaluation of additional fit indices is needed.

Insert Table 2 about here

The value for CFI ,which is an incremental index, is 0.982 and was above the suggested cut-off value of 0.95 (Hair, et al, 2006). The TLI value was 0.977 and was also above the suggested cut-off value of 0.95 (Hair, et al 2006). Similarly, the IFI value of 0.982 was also higher than the cut-off value. Other incremental indices were also high. NFI value was 0.96, whereas RFI value was 0.949. The results of the incremental fit indices supported the acceptance of the proposed model and therefore, we can conclude that the model has a good fit.

Construct validity

Different ranges of information can be used in defining convergent validity. According to Hair et al.(2006) standardized factor loadings (at least .5) , variance-extracted (at least 50%) and reliability (above .7) can be used to achieve convergent validity. As explained above, when using SPSS, reliability measures of two constructs (ATTSCAN and INFLU) exceeded the threshold value of .7, whereas reliability measures of the other two constructs (ATTPAR and PROM) fell just below the threshold value. Reliability results suggest that the convergent validity could not be clearly provided. However, when construct validity was calculated manually all results were higher than the suggested minimum of .7 (ATTSCAN .87, ATTPAR .73, PROM .76 and INFLU .90).

Standardized regression loadings are evaluated next. The highest three loadings have the value of .88. One links ATTSCAN to AttCan2, the other links ATTPAR to AttPar1 and the third one links INFLU to Influ2. There are five other factor loadings that exceed the threshold value of .7, two in the ATTSCAN construct, one in the ATTPAR and two in INFLU and none in PROM. The other 12 factor loadings are below the cut-off value of .7 and therefore, we can conclude that according to the standardized loading procedure convergent validity is not supported.

The variance-extracted is also evaluated and the estimates are 53 percent for ATTSCAN, 30 percent for ATTPAR, 31 percent for PROM and 54 percent for INFLU. Again, two results suggest that ATTSCAN and INFLU are above the threshold value, whereas ATTPAR and PROM are again below the threshold value of .5.

Discriminant validity is established by comparing the variance-extracted estimates for each factor with the squared inter-construct correlation associated with that factor (Hair, et al 2006). All variance extracted estimates are higher than the

corresponding inter-construct squared correlations. These results suggest that there is no problem with discriminant validity.

As suggested by Hair et al. (2006) face validity has to be established before even using CFA. In the study two scales were used from previous research (ATTCAN and INFLU), and therefore, were created by experts and face validity was established. The other two (ATTPAR and PROM) were adapted for the purpose of studying political candidates from other scales. Since they were also used by prior theory, face validity should be assured. However, some reservations remain due to the fact that they were not used for studying this particular constructs.

Nomological validity is established upon the squared correlation between factor scores (Hair, et al. 2006). Results show that several correlations among factors are negative, suggesting that there might be a problem with nomological validity.

DISCUSSION

To summarize, the model has some problems with nomological validity only. Convergent validity is not perfect either, but the model could be used in such cases. Other indices are or confirmed or slightly below the threshold values. Therefore, the problem of the nomological validity can be attributed to the fact that young voters haven't been studied in that context. For the problem with convergent validity, we can say that the model does not fit well, despite the fact that model fit indices were significant.

One of the reasons for such results can be attributed to the fact that the sample size is small. Having only 116 cases does not yield satisfactory results and therefore the study was limited in that term. The other reason might be the fact that the scales of two constructs, *attitude toward the party and the effects of promotion*, were adapted from other scales. Reliability and extracted variance measures showed the instability of those constructs. Every measure was below the suggested cut-off value, for both reliability and extracted variance. Moreover, the factor loadings were the worst on those two measures. Clearly, those constructs contaminated the measurement model. Therefore, the adaptation process should be re-evaluated and new measurements should be developed for those two constructs.

In that case, the convergent validity would probably be significant for all constructs, plus there would not be problems with nomological validity and therefore, the measurements would probably be valid. If the scales are redesigned, a replication study should be conducted in order to analyze if the new scales help strengthen the measurement model.

CONCLUSION

Targeting voters is a challenging task for campaign managers. As Gardner et al. (2005) implied there is a need for a more complex segmentation process. Explaining and understanding which are the most important external factors that affect the decision of

young voters is crucial for political campaigns in the process of segmentation. Once the external factors are identified political strategist will find it easier to organize and plan their campaigns accordingly.

A measurement model for voting behavior of young voters was proposed. The model was developed with constructs defined with prior research and tested among young voters. The measurement scales for the constructs *Attitude toward the candidate* and *Influence by others* were derived from theory, whereas the measurement scales for the *Attitude toward the party* and *The effects of campaign's promotion* were adapted from other scales that were used in previous research.

Unfortunately, the validity of the proposed measurement model is not satisfactory and therefore, the actual behavior cannot be measured with it. A new model with more sophisticated scales should be studied and developed. In that case, further analysis in evaluating which factors influence the voting behavior of the young voters might be possible.

Young voters are very important as a target group, and therefore a better understanding of their voting behavior can help political campaigns develop a better communication strategy and thus, persuade more voters in elections.

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Table 1*Correlation matrix of the latent constructs*

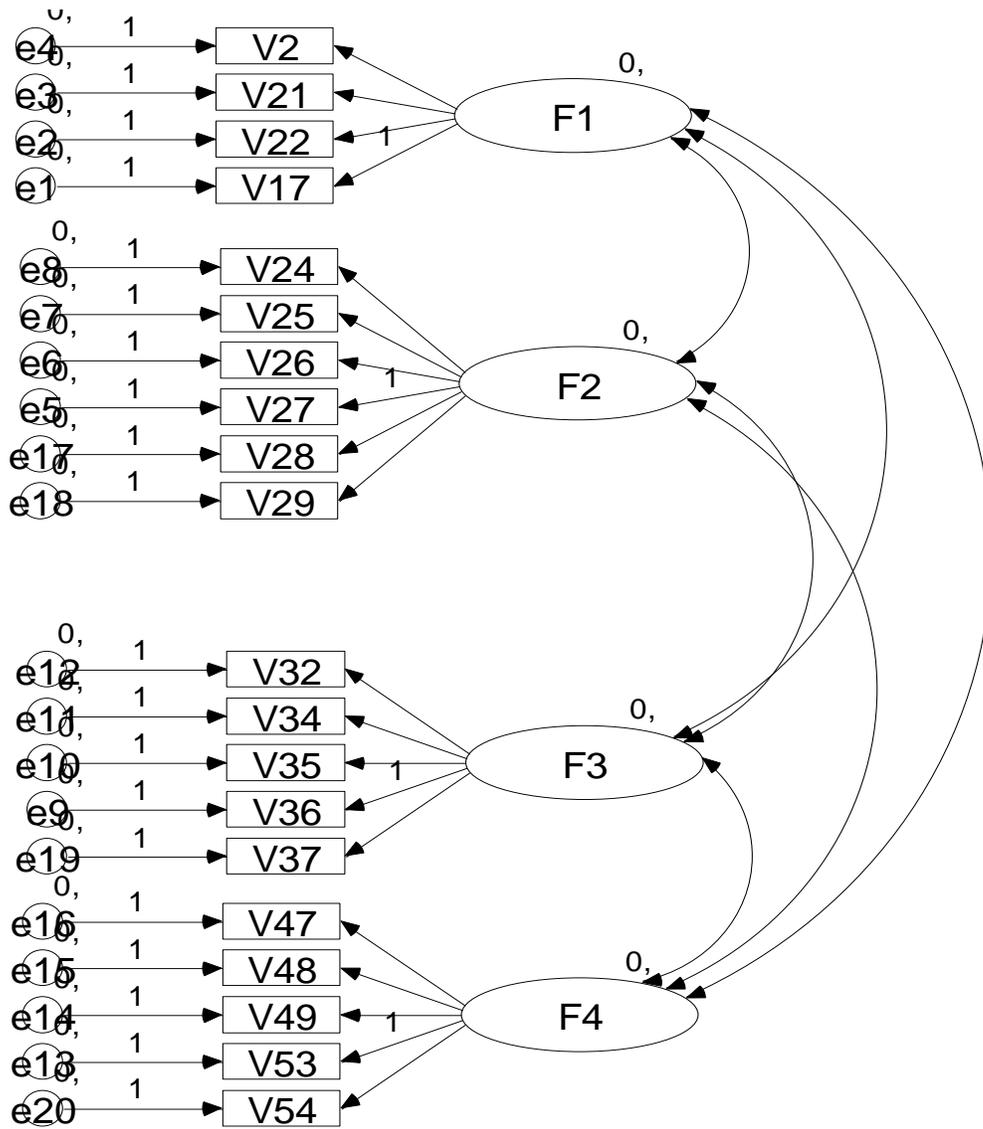
<i>Variable</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1. ATTCAN	.86*			
2. ATTPAR	.544	.69*		
3. PROM	-.097	-.078	.69*	
4. INFLU	-.050	-.011	.310	.85*

*Notes: N= 116, *Cronbach Alpha,***Table 2***CFA results – goodness of fit measures*

<i>Voting behavior Model</i>	
<i>Measures of absolute fit</i>	
Chi- Square	289.953
Degrees of freedom	164
Significance level	< 0.001
RMSEA	0.082
<i>Incremental fit measures</i>	
CFI	0.982
TLI	0.977
IFI	0.982
NFI	0.949
RFI	0.960

Notes: N= 116

APPENDIX 1 – The Confirmatory factor model



Note: F1 – Attitude toward the candidate (ATTCAN), F2 – Attitude toward the party (ATTPAR), F3 - The effects of promotion (PROM), F4 – Influence by others (INFLU)