

The dynamics of voter behavior and influence processes in electoral markets: a consumer behavior perspective

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Abstract

Consumer behavior theory is applied to voter behavior in the electoral context, and a model that focuses on perceived risk, voter involvement, and political opinion leadership (OL) is developed and tested. Data were gathered from a sample of 240 registered voters in Australia. The results show that perceived risk, voter involvement, and political OL played a central role in the voting process. The results also indicate that OL is influenced by voter involvement, perceived risk, and subjective knowledge. Further, the results show that satisfaction and voting stability are important consequences of OL. The significance of these findings to electoral marketing is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Marketing is an omnipresent feature of the landscape of modern life. Marketing techniques have been applied in virtually all areas of human endeavor from industry to religion. However, a prominent stream of discussion found in the literature relates to the generalizability of theory and findings across different domains. This discussion can be found in the work of [Arndt \(1978\)](#), [Kotler \(1972\)](#), and [Kotler and Levy \(1969\)](#) who argued for broadening the domain marketing beyond commercial goods. In the context of consumer behavior, [Shama \(1973\)](#) argued that the principles and underpinnings of consumer behavior were also relevant beyond the commercial domain. In many ways, researchers no longer draw significant distinctions between consumer behavior and, for example, voting behavior (see [Crosby and Taylor, 1983](#)). The assumption that similar psychological and behavioral principles govern voting and buying is widely accepted yet largely untested. As such, a reasonable starting point for broadening the consumer behavior theory and application is to locate theoretical areas where buying overlaps with voting.

Despite the pioneering work of [Burton and Netemeyer \(1992\)](#) and a few others, little research has been conducted in the political arena from the marketing (consumer behavior) perspective. Yet, marketing has much to contribute to the broader interdisciplinary interest in politics and the functioning of the democratic process. As such, we can explore this important market in a more extensive manner by bringing to bear the available knowledge and tools marketing has to offer. Therefore, we attempt to bring marketing concepts and ideas to the study of voter behavior (of elections) and so to take a step towards an integrated research perspective while providing new evidence concerning elections. We seek to explore the dynamics of voter behavior (decision making) during elections, by focusing on what are generally accepted principles in consumer behavior, and applying them in the electoral marketplace. This is important because a significant part of political marketing is candidates and parties spending large amounts of money on targeting voters to influence their decisions. Thus, of importance is a growing need to understand why voters behave in elections the way they do. Given both the theoretical issues related to domain comparability and electoral behavior, the study focuses on exploring the relationship of key antecedents to important outcomes within electoral markets. The model developed in this study concerns the relationships between voters’

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perceived risk in the context of electoral outcomes, their level of involvement, opinion leadership (OL), information search, knowledge and decision confidence, satisfaction with politics, and stability of voting behavior.

2. Conceptual development: consumer behavior theory and voter choice

The value of interpersonal communication in consumer decision making has been documented extensively in consumer research (e.g., Gilly et al., 1998). The justification for the central positioning of OL in our model (Fig. 1) emanates not only from consumer behavior research, but also from some of the classical works in economics and politics (e.g., Converse, 2000; Downs, 1957). In justifying his position for the rational utilization of scarce resources to obtain information for decision making, Downs (1957, p. 207) stated that “traditional economic theory assumes that unlimited amounts of free information are available to decision makers. In contrast, we seek to discover what political decision making is like when uncertainty exists and information is obtainable only at a cost.” Downs (1957) goes on to suggest that “the incentive of most citizens to acquire information before voting is very small” and that a “large percentage of citizens do not become informed to any significant degree on the issues involved in elections.” This differential information seeking suggests that some well-informed citizens act as opinion leaders and influence voting patterns.

Opinion leaders are credited with a large amount of interpersonal communication, and the role of OL in the context of voting and the distribution of information related to elections is likely to be significant. In discussing the distribution of information within an electorate, Converse (2000, p. 334) suggests that “a small fraction of the electorate claims a large fraction of the total political information accessible in memory to anyone.” The role of OL in voting is an important one, as Omura and Talarzyk (1983) argue that the potential for opinion leaders to shape public opinion is great. By implication, this emphasizes a prominent role of OL. As a point of departure, we consider OL as being a function of voters' risk perceptions, involvement, and subjective knowledge (see Fig. 1).

Along with OL, the concept of involvement has also been of significant interest to consumer researchers. In this context, involvement refers to the extent to which consumers view the focal object as a central part of their life. This proposition allows for a unified approach to involvement and thus a more theoretically useful construct in a wide array of contexts. Previous voter research has shown key effects depending on voters' levels of involvement. As such, we see a major role for involvement in determining voter choice. For example, Burton and Netemeyer (1992) found that involvement affects voter knowledge, confidence, and preference stability. The proposition is that involvement in politics should be a strong determinant of political OL and of subjective knowledge and information seeking. The connection between involvement and knowledge has been found previously in consumer behavior research related to

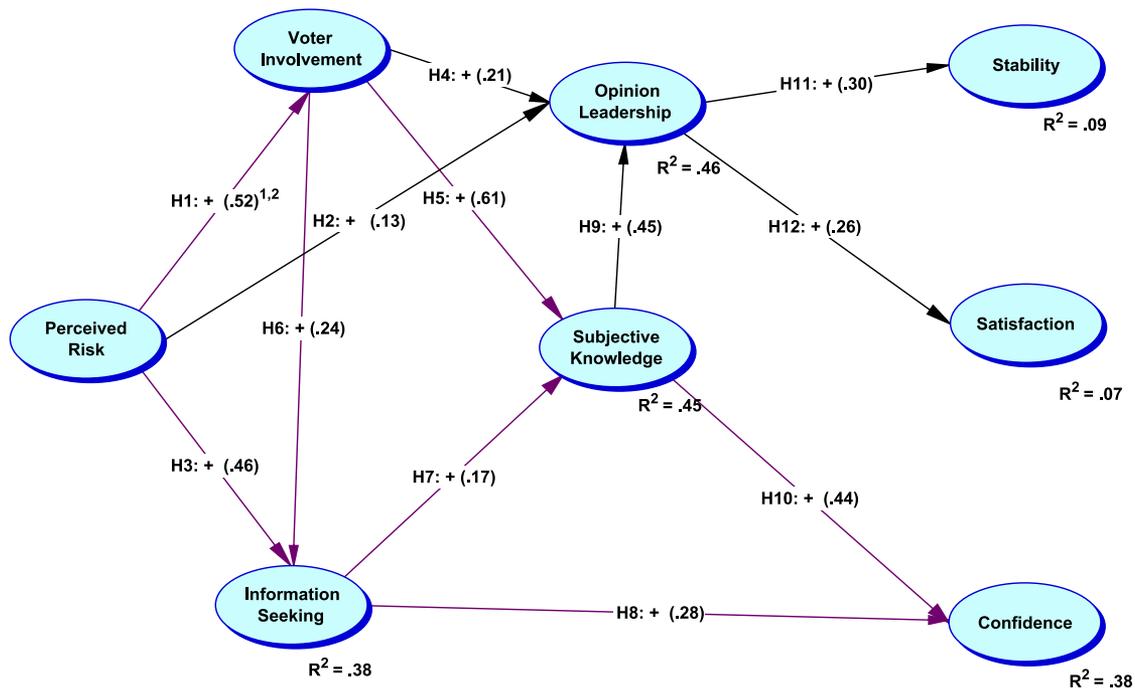


Fig. 1. The research model of the dynamics of voter behavior in the political marketing context. Note: ¹H1 indicates that the relationship was hypothesised, the + or – indicate the direction of the postulated relationship and the figures in parentheses are regression coefficients all of which were significant at $p < .01$. ²R² indicates the proportion of variance explained by the relevant regression equation.

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