Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

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Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

ABSTRACT

Previous research has conceptualized opinion leadership as a stable individual attribute. More recent research suggests that opinion leadership works as part of a reciprocal cycle with both political efficacy and civic participation (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). This research attempts to test the assumed stability of opinion leadership, examining whether opinion leadership can change over the course of an election cycle, particularly in response to self-reported expression variables.

Our analysis was conducted using panel survey data collecting before, during and after the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign season, as well as an estimate of individual ad exposure. Our data indicate that a significant decrease in self-reported opinion leadership does occur between wave 1 (February 2002) and wave 2 (November 2004). We next examine the relationship between expressive behaviors during the campaign season and change in opinion leadership – political talk, (β = .08, p < .05), civic participation (β = .07, p < .01), and clear candidate support (β = .07, p < .01) are all positive predictors of growth in opinion leadership. Conversely, exposure to campaign advertising negatively relates to change in opinion leadership, suggesting that a more crowded campaign communication environment inhibits the development of the opinion leadership attitude. Our study supports this opinion leadership-communication feedback model, demonstrating that not only do perceptions about one’s own leadership change over the course of the campaign, but that these changes are related to expressive behaviors.
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

For decades, communication scholars have been interested in opinion leaders – those individuals who “pass on what they read and hear [from the mass media] to those of their every-day associates for whom they are influential” (Katz, 1957). Opinion leadership has often been considered a stable trait, a personality factor that allows scholars to place individuals’ within discussion networks and examine their relationships with the rest of the network. However, the basic logic behind this presumption seems faulty. While research into opinion leadership has endured for several decades and in a variety of domains (Black, 1982; Katz, 1957; Kelly et al., 1991; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Myers & Robertson, 1972; Porter, 1974; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005; Shah & Scheufele, 2006), not much research has investigated how people become opinion leaders and whether opinion leadership can change over time. Although opinion leaders are generally recognized to have a particular area of expertise that does not necessarily overlap with other areas (Katz, 1957; Myers & Robertson, 1972; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005; Valente & Davis, 1999), more research is needed to determine whether this position as an opinion leadership can be affected by changes in personal and social situations.

Perhaps most importantly, an individual’s level of opinion leadership is not in-born – it must come from somewhere. As people are socialized into politics, it only makes sense that their self-perceptions would change, including the extent to which they view themselves as opinion leaders. This process is especially salient in 2008, as throngs of new voters become mobilized by the Barack Obama campaign. These new voters, mostly young adults, are not just experiencing the political process for perhaps the first time, but are finding themselves in the middle of dense networks of political discussion,
both online and offline. Observing this new pattern of behavior in themselves ought to be a precursor to a change in self-assessment about their own place in the dissemination of political ideas (Bem, 1967, 1972).

But beyond the initial development of opinion leadership, it stands to reason that perceived opinion leadership would change as a result of exposure to the extended campaign period of any presidential election. At the very least, presidential elections make political thought and discussion more salient (Eveland Jr., Shah, & Kwak, 2003), allowing individuals to better understand their social role as an opinion leader. In the context of an election cycle, the relative breadth and depth of coverage of the political process may encourage people to greater engagement with the political world and facilitate or hinder the recognition of opinion leadership among individuals. Recent work has suggested that opinion leadership is linked to both civic participation and political efficacy (Shah & Scheufele, 2006), which could be responsive to the increased interest that comes along with an election. Because the context of political discussion can change so much, we suggest that opinion leadership should not be assumed to be stable. In this paper, we will demonstrate significant change in self-perceived opinion leadership during a campaign season and model the factors that predict that change. Furthermore, we suggest that because opinion leadership is malleable, it should be considered a mediator, rather than a fixed personality construct; we demonstrate this relationship by examining individual political behaviors after a campaign season has concluded. To explain the rationale behind these presumptions, we first review the literature on opinion leadership, then apply to it previous research into self-perception.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

Opinion Leadership

The idea of a two-step flow of information and communication is not a new one. Instead of all people being equally and unilaterally affected by the introduction of new information or technology into the public discourse, it appears instead that some people are more likely to notice this new information and distribute it to others. Whether dealing with the diffusion of innovations and new technologies, the adoption of medical treatments and philosophies, or discussions about political issues and candidates, interpersonal communication plays a key role in the spread of new ideas (Katz, 1957; Kelly et al., 1991; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Robinson, 1976; Weimann, 1991). In particular, opinion leaders, who interact with both the mass media and with other individuals, play an important role in the distribution of information.

Opinion leaders straddle two different environments, gathering information primarily from the mass media and channeling it to the wider public. An opinion leader can be defined as someone who can influence others’ opinions and beliefs, because they are often relied on for advice and information (Katz, 1957; Kelly et al., 1991; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005; Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Opinion leaders are a key element of what Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) define as the two-step flow of information processing. In their studies of voting behavior in the 1940s, they found very few direct effects of the mass media on the way people make their political decisions. Instead, they theorized that the mass media primarily affect and inform certain opinion leaders, who then pass on this information to the rest of the public. Therefore, information is not passed along unilaterally from the media to the public as a whole, but instead is channeled through influential leaders in the community. Of course, the role of opinion
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

leaders in distributing information does not mean that the media does not have an effect, but instead that both processes appear to work in tandem to influence public perceptions (Kwak, 2003; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987; Robinson, 1976; Trolldahl, 1966). Ultimately, opinion leaders play an influential role in influencing people’s decision-making processes by serving as important conduits between the media and the public.

Opinion leaders are found in a variety of contexts and circumstances. Beyond mediating the distribution of news and political information, opinion leadership has also been shown to play a key role in the diffusion of new innovations and technologies. For example, in attempting to inform and initiate greater HIV risk prevention behaviors among a gay community, researchers found that using opinion leaders helped spread information about HIV risks and promote safe-sex practices (Kelly et al., 1991). Further, in terms of public policy debates, those who are nominated as advisors change their opinions much more quickly on a variety of topics than the rest of the public, and in general, the public does follow the trend set by these opinion leaders (Black, 1982). Thus, for both medical behaviors and political policy, opinion leaders play an important role in leading the community to accept changes. And it is not only the general public who relies upon opinion leaders for information and advice. Political elites, such as legislatures and lobbyists, depend on more knowledgeable individuals in deciding to support and promote particular legislation (Porter, 1974). Thus, opinion leaders span a wide range of possible debates and decisions, influencing the general public and the elite alike.

So, who are these opinion leaders that have such an ability to influence the information environment? Opinion leaders have been found among every strata of
society, although others have argued that education generally increases the likelihood of opinion leadership, especially in political or public policy debates (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Robinson, 1976). They generally are very well-informed and interested in the specific subject, pay close attention to the media, willing to differentiate themselves from others in public, and have more social connections across groups to move information (Burt, 1999; Chan & Misra, 1990; Katz, 1957; Myers & Robertson, 1972; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005; Weimann, 1991). Further, opinion leaders often turn to other opinion leaders to discuss and information, before communicating it to opinion seekers (Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005). Therefore, although opinion leaders often use more domain-specific and “quality” sources of information, this does not preclude them turning to others to validate their opinions or to learn information outside their expertise. This research suggests that a two-step flow description of communication may be overly simple, as there are also direct effects of the mass media on the public, as well as communication between and among opinion leaders, rather than a single method of communication (Katz, 1957; Robinson, 1976).

But, opinion leadership is not a universal trait. Opinion leadership occurs in a variety of different topics and domains, and someone who serves as an opinion leader in a particular area is not especially more likely to be an opinion leader in a different area (Katz, 1957; Myers & Robertson, 1972; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005). This lack of overlap in opinion leadership may be linked to the information and social environment – opinion leaders pay more attention to a specific type of information and are more knowledgeable than their peers, even if they are not overall experts (Porter, 1974; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005). Opinion leaders have been theorized to serve two
important roles in their community – not only are they respected experts turned to for advice, but they have greater connections to information sources outside the restricted community (Burt, 1999; Katz, 1957; Weimann, 1991). These outside sources of information allow opinion leaders a unique perspective and new innovations to introduce to their community, giving them a “competitive advantage” in information distribution (Burt, 1999). Also, having more outside sources serves as a source of social capital and making it more likely these people will be included in conversations (Burt, 1999). Therefore, opinion leadership in a given area may be due as much to the social environment and context of the opinion leader as the intrinsic characteristics of the individual.

Although most research has conceptualized of opinion leadership of a relatively stable characteristic, it is possible that opinion leadership can be altered depending on the social context of the individual. Given that opinion leadership is not only linked to individual characteristics but also to their social environment, a change in that environment could cause some people to adopt the role of opinion leader. For example, while opinion leadership has generally been linked to more extreme ideological positions, building off Noelle-Neumann’s research, Hellevik and Bjørklund suggest, “If we disregard the difference in social setting, [Noelle-Neumann’s] theoretical perspective implies that opinion leadership will not be a stable characteristic of an individual, but a behavioral tendency which fluctuates according to the climate of opinion when controversial matters are discussed” (1991, p. 174). As the information environment changes or as people’s interest in a particular topic is heightened, they may become more likely to serve as opinion leaders.
In addition, changes in a social environment could be linked to growth in opinion leadership. As participation in political and civic activities generally exposes people to more diversified networks and creates more “weak ties” through which information can be learned, participation and discussion could both lead to people developing the expertise and outside information sources that encourages opinion leadership. In fact, opinion leadership has been linked to civic participation, with opinion leaders being more likely to participate civically (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Also, political efficacy has been linked with opinion leadership in a dual process, as opinion leadership both creates a greater sense of political efficacy, but also that political efficacy encourages opinion leadership (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Thus, the research suggests that opinion leadership, rather than being an inherent and stable individual trait, can be affected by changes in the information and social environment of individuals.

*Self-Perception Theory*

Of course, there is no universally applicable designation of an opinion leader. Instead, whether one considers oneself an opinion leader often depends on self-assessment and assessment of the social environment. When individuals take in information about themselves from their social environments, it may fall under the heading of self-perception (Bem, 1967, 1972). Building on older ideas of interpersonal perception and assessment, self-perception theory suggests that people “come to ‘know’ their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior” (Bem, 1972, p. 2). Nisbett and Wilson (1977) demonstrated the self-perception phenomenon by showing that individuals tend to use the
same kinds of descriptions when explaining the reasons for their own actions as when explaining actions taken by others.

Indeed, Markus (1986) finds that the need to reconcile attitudes with one’s behavior is so strong that, when prompted to engage in counter-attitudinal behavior, they will revise their assessment of current and former attitudes. His finding that individuals rationalized their positions on contentious political issues by citing the actions of actors such as politicians might imply an active cognitive process of self-perception. However, further research has demonstrated this effect not just regarding behaviors and opinions, but emotions as well (Laird & Bresler, 1992). Cues as slight as one’s facial expressions and physical stance have been shown to impact self-reports of one’s emotions and attitudes (Flack Jr., Laird, & Cavallaro, 1999). This wide range of effects has allowed for self-perception research on topics as varied as pain perception (Corah & Boffa, 1970), evaluations of consumer products (Förster, 2004), interpersonal affect (Seligman, Fazio, & Zanna, 1980), and use of technology in the workplace (Kim & Malhotra, 2005). In the field of political science, Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida (1989) argue that foreign policy issues are as accessible to voters as domestic issues, because the process of “experiencing” them through self-perception tends to be the same.

Perhaps most importantly for the present study, experimental research has shown that attitude change can be affected through the application of exogenous forces (Bem & McConnell, 1970). When those attitude change responses happen, however, they do not happen uniformly – additional factors, such as the tendency to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than situations, impact the extent to which an individual will take on an attitude consonant with their self-perception (Laird & Berglas, 1975).
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

Though we often think of opinion leadership as a personality trait, it is just as reasonable to conceptualize it as an assessment of oneself, based on perceptions of one’s own behavior. After all, “leadership” implies something that should be a recognizable behavior – that you are successfully transmitting relevant information and leading others to hold a certain opinion. Although much of the research on self-perception involves the reconciliation of strongly dissonant states, or involuntary or otherwise undesirable behavior, there is reason to believe that behaviors considered to be pro-social, undertaken by choice, should also have the same impact on attitudes. It is this supposition that guides our hypotheses in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & HYPOTHESES

Before we begin to investigate our question of primary interest in this study – that is, how internal and external factors might impact perceptions of opinion leadership – we first pose two basic research questions that will provide the foundation for our examination of change in opinion leadership:

RQ1. Do individuals’ self-perceived levels of opinion leadership change during a presidential campaign season?

RQ2. What demographic and contextual factors predict opinion leadership scores in the pre-campaign period?

The link between observation of one’s own actions and perception of oneself is an important one, which we contend accounts for changes in reported levels of opinion leadership. In particular, factors that change how one views one’s place within the socio-political environment should be related to how one sees oneself as an opinion leader. Thus, we propose two sets of hypotheses relating change in opinion leadership to political expression and action:
**Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle**

H1a. Political discussion during the campaign season will predict an increase in opinion leadership across that period.

H1b. Open candidate support will predict an increase in opinion leadership across the campaign period.

H2a. Civic participation during the campaign season will predict an increase in opinion leadership across that period.

H2b. Political participation during the campaign season will predict an increase in opinion leadership across that period.

Additionally, factors not directly under the control of individuals should serve to shape the environment in which one makes judgments about oneself. Specifically, exposure to political ads may create an impression of a much more crowded opinion environment, in which one’s own leadership is much less impactful. Thus, we propose an additional hypothesis relating change in opinion leadership to political ad exposure:

H3. Exposure to political advertising during the campaign season will predict a decrease in opinion leadership during that period.

**METHODS**

Our analyses were conducted using survey panel data collected first during February 2002 and again after the presidential election in November 2004 (N = 1459). The initial data collection in February 2002 was conducted by Synovate as part of DDB-Chicago’s annual mail survey, the “Life Style Study.” The Life Style Study relies on a stratified quota sampling technique. Large subsets of people are contacted via mail and asked to indicate whether they are willing to participate in periodic surveys for small incentives. A sample is then drawn from those who agree to reflect the properties of the population within each of the nine Census divisions in terms of household size and income, population density of city of residence, and age of respondent. This starting sample is then adjusted within a range of subcategories that include race, gender, and
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

marital status in order to compensate for differences in return rates, with more surveys mailed to population categories that respond at lower rates. This sampling technique has been shown to produce data that are highly comparable to conventional probability sampling (see Putnam, 2000). This method was used to generate the initial sample of 5,000 respondents for the 2002 Life Style Study, which serves as the baseline data for the panel study.

Of the 5,000 mail surveys distributed in February 2002, 3,580 usable responses were received, which represents a response rate of 71.6% against the mailout. For the November 2004 recontact study, we developed another custom questionnaire, this time for individuals who completed the 2002 survey. In this case, 2,450 questionnaires were mailed and 1,484 completed responses were received, for a response rate of 60.1% and retention rate of 41.4%.

Measures

Opinion Leadership. Our outcome variable of opinion leadership was measured in each wave using a scale comprised of agreement scores on two statements, “I have more self-confidence than most of my friends” and “I like to be considered a leader.” In each wave, indices were construct by averaging respondents’ answers on a 6-point agree-disagree scale. In the February 2002 wave, the two items had a correlation of .41 (p < .001), a mean of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 1.10. In the November 2004 wave, they had a correlation of .48 (p < .001), a mean of 3.79 and a standard deviation of 1.19.

Interest in Politics. Respondents’ level of interest in politics was measured with one item on the February 2002 wave, using a 6-point agree-disagree scale and the statement, “I am interested in politics” (M = 3.05, SD = 1.56).
Forms of Expression. Two scales were constructed in the November 2004 wave measuring different forms of expression during the campaign season, specifically “during the past three months” before completion of the survey. General political talk was measured using five items asking respondents, for example, how frequently they had “talked about politics with co-workers,” on an 8-point scale. An index was created by averaging these items ($\alpha = .90, M = 3.94, SD = 1.82$). Open candidate support was measured with two items, “It should be fairly obvious to other people which candidate I supported” and “I don’t mind if other people can tell which candidate I supported,” on a 6-point agree-disagree scale. The items were averaged to create an index ($r = .51$ ($p < .001$), $M = 4.33, SD = 1.36$).

Forms of Participation. Another two scales were constructed in the November 2004 wave measuring political and civic participation during the campaign season. Political participation was measured with eight items, such as how often respondents “wore a campaign button or candidate t-shirt” and “contributed money to a political campaign,” on an 8-point scale. These eight items were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .76, M = 1.61, SD = 0.85$). Another three items, such as “worked on a community project,” measured civic participation on the same 8-point scale, and were averaged to create an index ($\alpha = .74, M = 2.29, SD = 1.62$).

Contextual and Demographic Variables. For the analyses of the 2004 election panel data, four contextual variables were constructed: population density, marital status, home ownership and residential stability. Population density was measured in four categories ranging from non-MSA to Metros of populations over 2 million. Marital status was measured by a single item with five categories: married, widowed, divorced,
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

separated, and never married. Except for married, all other categories were collapsed into “not married” for constructing marital status (64.1% were married). Home ownership was measured by asking whether respondents own their home (80.9% owned their home). An index of residential stability was created by asking respondents about the likelihood of moving in the next five years (reverse coded) and the contentment of living in the same town the rest of life ($r = .35$ ($p < .001$), $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.46$).

Demographic variables included age, gender, race, income, and years of education measured in standard fashion (see Shah, Cho, Eveland Jr., & Kwak, 2005). Additionally, we measured three orientation variables: religiosity, ideological affiliation and strength of ideological affiliation. An index for religiosity was created by taking the mean of each respondent’s answers to questions soliciting the importance of religion in their life, the importance of spirituality, their belief in God, and their belief in the existence of the Devil, all on a 6-point scale ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.25$). Conservative ideology was measured on a 5-point scale with 1 being “very conservative” and 5 being “very liberal” (reverse coded, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.97$). Strength of ideological affiliation was computed as respondents’ distance from neutral on the 5-point measure of conservatism/liberalism ($M = .74$, $SD = .70$).

**Exposure to Televised Political Ads.** Political advertisement exposure was calculated by combining measures of the ads that aired in particular media markets on particular types of television programming with measures of individuals’ consumption of those types of programs. For each of the available media markets, the number of campaign ads for all electoral contests aired major party candidates during the 2004 campaign was counted, along with the type of program on which they aired (i.e., morning
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

news program, soap opera, local evening news, talk show, game show, or other).

Using these data, we then used specific measures of panel respondents’ viewing patterns to estimate the volume of each individual’s advertising exposure. That is, estimates of each respondent’s exposure to political advertising were based on an algorithm derived from the volume of these ads on a market-by-market basis, the placement of these ads in particular programs in those markets, and each geographically-situated respondent’s viewing of certain programming categories. These program viewing measures focused on the five programming types within which a vast majority of political ads appear — morning news programs, daytime soap operas, daytime talk shows, game shows, and local evening news — along with an overall primetime entertainment viewing measure to capture ad placement outside these high density categories (see Ridout, Shah, Goldstein, & Franz, 2004).

Thus, by contextualizing the aggregate volume of these campaign ads into respondents’ individual television viewing patterns, our measure of campaign ad exposure captures the maximum possible number of ads to which each respondent might potentially be exposed. Specifically, this individual-level campaign ad exposure was calculated as follows:

\[
\text{6} \quad \text{Exposure to political ads} = \sum_{i=1}^{6} (\text{Market Ad Volume}_i \times \text{Viewing Time}_i)
\]

where “Market Ad Volume\(_i\)” represents the total number of ads placed in each of the six program types in each respondent’s media market (\(i = 1, \ldots, 6\)), and “Viewing Time\(_i\)” denotes the amount of time a respondent spent with each of the six program types (\(i = 1, \ldots, 6\)).
Additionally, since our measures of political ad exposure were constructed based on respondents’ television viewing, TV news use was controlled for in the analyses in order to rule out potential endogeneity issues. Two items were included that measured exposure to TV news about the presidential campaign as well as government and politics in general. Respondents also reported their attention to each of these stories on a 10-point scale that ranged from very little attention to very close attention. An index for TV hard news use was created by standardizing and then averaging respondents’ scores on these items ($\alpha = .86, M = .00, SD = .84$). Complete question wording for these items and all other survey questions can be found in Appendix 1.

RESULTS

Our first research question was tested using a paired sample t-test, allowing us to compare individuals’ responses from wave 1 to those at wave 2. Between the two waves, mean opinion leadership decreased from 4.03 to 3.79, a difference that is significant at the .001 level ($t = 8.541$). In the first wave, we conducted a linear regression test predicting opinion leadership with all of our contextual and demographic variables, as well as interest in politics. Of those, six were significant predictors: gender, coded as female ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$); race, coded as white ($\beta = -.08, p < .01$); income ($\beta = .09, p < .01$); education ($\beta = .14, p < .001$); conservative ideology ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$); and interest in politics ($\beta = .10, p < .001$). On the whole, this model accounted for 8.7% of the variance in wave 1 opinion leadership; full regression results can be found in Table 1.

Our four hypotheses were tested using linear regression to predict opinion leadership in the second wave. The model included all of the variables used in our first wave model, as well as political talk, open candidate support, civic participation, political
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

participation, political ad exposure and TV news use. Additionally, opinion leadership in wave 1 was included to allow us to test effects on opinion leadership change between waves; wave 1 opinion leadership accounted for 30.3% of variance in wave 2 opinion leadership ($\beta = .49, p < .001$). Four control variables were also significant predictors: age ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$), race ($\beta = -.05, p < .05$), income ($\beta = .07, p < .05$) and marital status ($\beta = -.08, p < .01$). Contextual and demographic variables accounted for an additional 1.5% of variance in wave 2 opinion leadership.

Results from the regression show that political talk ($\beta = .08, p < .05$) and open candidate support ($\beta = .07, p < .01$) are both significant predictors, supporting hypotheses H1a and H1b. Civic participation ($\beta = .07, p < .01$) is also significant, but not political participation, supporting only hypothesis H2a. Finally, ad exposure is a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$), supporting hypothesis H3. Our hypothesized independent variables accounted for an additional 2.4% of variance in wave 2 opinion leadership. Full regression results can be seen in Table 2.

Additional Analysis

To test whether change in opinion leadership had forward-moving effects on political behaviors, we examined three additional models predicting change in blog reading, online forum participation and social group work between wave 2 and a third wave collected in July 2005 ($N = 1050$). Blog reading was measured with a single question using an 8-point scale, which was collapsed to a dichotomous variable due to its negative skew (8.9% read blogs in wave 2, 6.4% in wave 3). Online forum participation and social group work were each also measured with single 8-point questions (forum: $M = 1.47, SD = 1.54$ in wave 2, $M = 1.44, SD = 1.48$ in wave 3; social group: $M = 1.98, SD$...
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

= 1.76 in wave 2, $M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.60$ in wave 3). These additional models included the same contextual and demographic controls as our previous models, along with wave 2 opinion leadership and the wave 2 variables for each wave 3 outcome.

In these three models, each change outcome showed an impact of opinion leadership. Change in blog readership was only marginally significant ($\beta = .06, p < .1$), while clearer relationships were found for online forum participation ($\beta = .06, p < .05$) and social group work ($\beta = .08, p < .01$). These results help to illustrate the potential impact that a malleable opinion leadership construct may have on future behavior.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analyses described in this research begin the process of outlining the volatility of opinion leadership as an attitude. We find that, contrary to some assumptions, it is not necessarily a stable trait, and that it may change during the course of a presidential campaign – specifically, that it was reduced in the general public during the 2004 race. Furthermore, we find that exposure to political ads predicts this decrease, while political expression and civic participation are related to increased opinion leadership. Additionally, demographic and contextual factors such as age, being white, and being married predict a decrease, while income is a positive predictor of change in opinion leadership.

Given these findings, we can conclude that opinion leadership is not a stable individual trait, but is subject to change over time. Since opinion leadership is based on an individual’s perception of themselves in relation to other people, it is hardly surprising that this perception can and does change. While our findings replicated many of the previous examples of who is likely to be an opinion leader, including those who are
especially interested in the particular topic and the more highly educated (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Robinson, 1976), we are more interested in the ways in which demographics can predict change in opinion leadership over the election cycle. It is hardly surprising that young people are most likely to come to recognize themselves as influential opinion leaders, as they are being socialized into the democratic process. Younger voters are often more reachable for campaigns, and a higher income is likely to encourage this process, for many of the same reasons. Political campaigns typically target wealthier Americans, in part due to the greater likelihood that they will participate politically, both through donating money and through voting (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In a media system that is designed to produce a profit, targeting the wealthier segments of the population is more likely to encourage advertisers’ attention (McChesney & Nichols, 2002), but may also have the effect of further encouraging the economic elite to think of themselves as influential leaders in the system.

On the other hand, our results indicate that it is non-whites who are more likely to perceive themselves as opinion leaders and the campaign process only exacerbates this difference. Given that other traditional socio-economic status measures such as income and education generally give those more privileged the edge in opinion leadership, it is interesting that white people are less likely to consider themselves opinion leaders. It may be that, for politics and the political process in particular, minorities are more likely to see themselves as being able to influence others and give important advice, due to their unique position somewhat outside the system. In addition, minorities are often focused on as important votes to court in the election process – for the Democratic Party, who
generally receives the majority of the African-American vote, it is a means to shore up their base, while both parties have attempted to court the Latino vote in recent elections (Kohut, 2005; Nagourney & Steinhauer, 2008; Nissen, 2000; Sanchez, 2004). Therefore, this more intensive media and political candidate coverage of minority voters and their issues could encourage greater self-perception of themselves as influential opinion leaders and increase their position as conduits between media coverage and public opinion.

Moving beyond demographic variables likely to produce changes in opinion leadership, we find that several interpersonal and social situations are likely to encourage perceiving oneself as an opinion leader. As noted above, research has indicated that interpersonal discussion and more heavy media use are both linked to opinion leadership (Katz, 1957; Robinson, 1976; Roch, 2005), but our study also indicates that political talk is also predictive of positive growth in the extent in which one sees oneself as an opinion leader. In fact, political talk, open candidate support, and civic participation all encourage an increase in opinion leadership. These variables share common attributes – the exposure to other political people who are politically and civically involved and engaged. Furthermore, as political talk and participation is likely to occur among like-minded individuals, this could reinforce one’s opinion and lead to a greater perception of oneself as a valuable contributing member to others’ information and attitudes (Mutz, 2006). As previous research has indicated that a position on the margins of a group and a larger network are likely to produce opinion leaders, because they can introduce new ideas into the group’s conversation, highlighting their role as distributors of information and advice.
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

(Burt, 1999; Katz, 1957; Weimann, 1991), this same function encourages the growth of opinion leadership over time.

Of course, another key component of opinion leadership is their interest in and attention to the mass media for information about the topic. However, in the context of this study, exposure to political advertising negatively predicted opinion leadership. In other words, greater exposure to campaign advertisements decreased the likelihood of perceiving oneself as an opinion leader. Although this result may appear to contradict previous research about the importance of the media in providing information to opinion leaders, it may also remind individuals of their relatively limited reach in distributing information and ideas, as well as the great diversity of opinions in society. When exposed to a great number of campaign advertisements, individuals may rate their own contribution to others’ knowledge as less important, thus inhibiting their perception of themselves as opinion leaders in their community.

Ultimately, however, this study does provide convincing evidence that opinion leadership is not a static construct, but is instead responsive to changes in the individual and their environment. Expanding on Shah & Scheufele (2006), who demonstrate that individual changes in efficacy can encourage opinion leadership, our study not only proposes individual traits like race and age can affect the growth in this perception, but situational factors like campaign advertisements and political talk can also encourage this growth. Opinion leadership is a perceptual variable, and, as such, responds to both individual and situational factors that can encourage or inhibit its expression. A campaign context may be an especially important environment in which to examine changes in its development and expression because it is likely to encourage individuals to reconsider
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

their position relative to others by making one’s perception of oneself as an opinion leader salient and more responsive to change.

Our finding that opinion leadership contributes to positive change in political behaviors such as blog reading and social group work after the campaign season shows that this process doesn’t end when the election is over. The perception of oneself as an opinion leader may not only change during the election timeframe, but may further influence how one behaves with regard to politics and self-expression moving forward. These relationships indicate that we ought to consider the place of opinion leadership in a model to be as an endogenous predictor, not simply as a stable personality construct. It can be impacted by various social and psychological forces, but still retains the ability to affect behaviors and attitudes in the future.

The models we tested to confirm this possibility only scratch the surface of how opinion leadership might impact people’s political lives, but the common thread between them is all three outcomes are behaviors taken on by relatively small, elite groups. Political blogs had their first significant exposure during the 2004 campaign, and remain relatively low in broad appeal; use of online discussion forums and working in support of a cause are perhaps not as infrequent in the general population, but are not commonplace. All of these activities require a particular combination of motivation and available time. Future research would do well to examine the connections between perception of oneself as an opinion leader and future motivations toward political and expressive action.

Beyond that, the dynamic nature of the campaign environment offers a number of opportunities to further pursue the questions raised in this study. For example, measurement of discussion habits might help to validate self-reports of opinion
Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

leadership by comparing them to actual discussion patterns. The importance of the Internet to political discussion, particularly among younger people, may also play a significant role in the increase and decrease of opinion leadership during campaigns.

Additionally, more substantial modeling of opinion leadership as a mediator in change models may offer dramatic new insights about the nature of the opinion leadership attribute. As our study focused on just one campaign season, and thus is affected by all of its idiosyncrasies, replications of our basic design during future campaigns, and during non-campaign periods, would help to illuminate some of the lasting characteristics of assessments of opinion leadership. Our study also uses somewhat crude measurements of political expression, and more detailed instruments may allow for a more precise view of the process of change in opinion leadership.

As political discussion, expression and participation patterns continue to change, we urge scholars to also understand opinion leadership as a fluid attitude construct, vulnerable to change as a result of both one’s own behavior and factors from one’s social environment. Any variable which affects how one sees oneself situated in a discussion network should have an impact on opinion leadership, as should those variables that impact how we see our discussion partners’ information intake. Identifying those variables and piecing them together into a unified model of opinion leadership change represents an important step in understanding how this part of political socialization creates active citizens.

REFERENCES


Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle


Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

Political Expression and Opinion Leadership: Changes During a Campaign Cycle

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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Adjusted $R^2 = 8.7\%$

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Dependent Variable: Opinion Leadership (Wave 1)

Table 2

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Adjusted $R^2 = 34.2\%$

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Dependent Variable: Opinion Leadership (Wave 2)
APPENDIX 1 – QUESTION WORDING

All behaviors measured on an 8-point scale of frequency in past three months

Political Talk

- Talked about politics with co-workers
- Talked about politics with people who disagree with me
- Talked about politics with friends
- Talked about politics with family
- Talked about politics with people who agree with me

Political Participation

- Worked on behalf of a social group or cause
- Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech
- Encouraged someone to register to vote
- Wore a campaign button or candidate t-shirt
- Displayed a campaign bumper sticker or yard sign
- Worked for a political party or candidate
- Circulated a petition for a candidate or issue
- Contributed money to a political campaign

Civic Participation

- Went to a club meeting
- Did volunteer work
- Worked on a community project