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# A study of voter psychology

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## **A Study of Voter Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on applying consumer behaviour theory to understand voters’ electoral behaviour. The focus is on developing a micro-model that incorporates voter involvement, political opinion leadership, political knowledge, confidence and risk. The study was undertaken in a by-election in Australia for a Federal House of Representatives Seat. Data were gathered from a sample of registered voters. The results show a significant influence of involvement on political opinion leadership. Political opinion leadership was also shown to influence subjective voter knowledge and knowledge impacting on voter decision confidence. The findings also confirmed a strong difference in voter satisfaction depending on voter involvement.

### **Introduction**

Political marketing has become a significant area of interest for marketing academics. Interestingly, the focus of political marketing has often been on managerial issues such as that of Kotler (1982), O’Cass (1996), Butler and Collins (1994) and Lock and Harris (1996) who have a strong marketing management focus. However, there has been some interest, although not significant from consumer researchers related to treating voters as consumers (Newman, 1985; O’Cass 2002; Shama, 1973). Shama (1973) argued that perhaps the most powerful test for applying marketing in politics (political marketing), is by examination of the applicability of consumer behaviour concepts to the area of voter behaviour. This study seeks to further explore the dynamics of voter behaviour during elections by exploring a micro-model of voter characteristics that lead to increased voter confidence and satisfaction. The study examines the relationships between voter perceived risk, involvement, opinion leadership (OL), subjective knowledge, voter confidence and information seeking behaviour.

### **Voter Behaviour Theory**

Previous voter research has shown key effects depending on level of involvement, for example, research by Burton and Netemeyer (1992) examined the effects of situational and enduring involvement on voters response involvement, knowledge, confidence and preference stability. Their findings indicated significant effects for involvement on voter knowledge and confidence and preference stability. The findings of Burton and Netemeyer (1992) supported the earlier work of Beatty, Kahle and Homer (1988) who also examined the relationship between involvement and commitment of consumer purchase activity for soft-drinks. The value of interpersonal communication in consumer decision making has been documented extensively in consumer research (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Opinion leaders are credited with a large amount of interpersonal communication and studies have examined selected demographic and social characteristics of opinion leaders. Much less effort has been directed at understanding the drivers of opinion leadership and even less in the context of voter behaviour. The proposition raised here is that involvement in politics should be a strong determinant of political opinion leadership and that political opinion leaders are motivated to discuss politics or offer advice because of their personal involvement in it. Similar to the arguments of Feick and Price (1987) involvement appears to be the predominant explanation for opinion leaders’ conversations about politics. The opinion leader is the interested and

involved consumer that exerts influence over the attitude's and behaviours of other voters. Whilst Burton and Netemeyer (1992) studied involvement and knowledge they did not extend the theoretical or empirical work to the involvement-opinion leadership relationship. They proposed and tested involvement-knowledge, however a more appropriate relationship may extend to involvement-opinion leadership-knowledge. Given the propositions found in the literature on involvement and opinion leadership it is hypothesised that

H1: Voter Involvement has a Significant Effect on Political Opinion Leadership.

A prominent issue for political parties, politicians and voters is knowledge. How much a voter believes they know about parties and politicians and elections is vital in the sense that it will influence information acquisition and actual decision-making. Involvement has been argued to have either a direct or indirect effect on consumers' subjective perception of how much they think they know about products (Burton & Netemeyer, 1992; O' Cass, 1999; Zaichkowsky, 1985b; Zinkhan & Muderrisoglu, 1985). A synthesis of the consumer behaviour and voter behaviour literature indicates that voter involvement has the potential to influence a voters perception of how much they think they know regarding elections, political parties and politicians, degree of satisfaction with politics, voting and politicians. Similar to Fazio and Zanna (1981) personal experience with politics (leading to greater knowledge) leads to greater confidence. Thus, this argument is more inline with Burton and Netemeyer (1992) in that subjective knowledge affects confidence in a positive manner. This also extends to the enhanced (stronger) beliefs that opinion leaders may hold about their knowledge of a focal object (e.g. politics). As indicated by Corey (1971) opinion leaders involvement in a specific product class distinguishes them from non-opinion leaders and as Ditcher (1966) argued involvement motivates product related knowledge and influence. As such it is hypothesized that

H2: Political opinion leadership has a significant effect on subjective political knowledge.

H3: Voter involvement has a significant effect on subjective knowledge.

Risk has been identified as a determinant of involvement in products and purchase decisions for products. What may be argued is that when a consumer perceives risk associated with any activity, including voting then involvement will also be increased in the identified activity because of the stimuli's impact on the individual's ego. Childers (1986) suggested that opinion leadership should be positively correlated with perceived risk. However, his findings indicated correlations that were significant between the two constructs in the context of cable television use. As such it is hypothesised that

H4: Voter opinion leadership has a significant effect on perceived risk.

H5: Voter subjective knowledge has a significant effect on perceived risk.

H6: Voter perceived risk has a significant effect on involvement.

The confidence with which one holds their beliefs is an important contributor to consumer behaviour. Consumer confidence has been argued to consist of fundamentally two types; knowledge confidence and choice confidence. Confidence is argued to represent a consumers' certainty regarding what is known about the stimuli under consideration, including attributes and the importance of attributes and their performance. Choice confidence however, represents a consumer's certainty about which brand to choose. As discussed above Ols hold stronger views about their knowledge of politics and confidence in making choices. In the political context this would imply voters who are Ols are more involved and as such, exert greater influence would be more confident and have more confidence in their voting choices. As such it is hypothesised that

H7: Voter involvement has a significant effect on voter confidence.

H8: Opinion leadership has a significant effect on voter confidence.

Information search or seeking in the context of electoral behaviour, is defined as information seeking which voters engage in to facilitate decision making in an election and the value

placed on various sources of information (including newspapers, television, paid advertising, and word of mouth) to aid in their decision making. Search for information related to choice is a major element of consumer behaviour theory. Overall, there appears to be some support for the view that consumer (or voter) involvement will affect on the extent of information search. Although the empirical support is a little tenuous, the logical connection can be seen, for example, in the work of Houston and Rothschild (1978), who fundamentally viewed intensity of search as simply one form of response involvement. Although not specifically defined in the literature, we may view the extent of search as a desire to be informed and keep up to date. This is particularly relevant in the political choice context if we consider the varied information sources available for voters to access information during campaigns and the significant volume of communications that occurs during an election. One's level of knowledge is important in influencing one degree of search and ultimate desire to keep informed during elections. Considering the arguments of both Bloch and Richins (1983) and Beatty and Smith (1987), we expect that those more involved in politics will hold a stronger desire to keep informed during an election, and as such, it is hypothesized that

H9: Voter involvement has a significant effect on the desire to keep informed during elections.

H10: Voter perceived risk has a significant effect on the desire to keep informed during elections.

H11: Voter subjective knowledge has a significant effect on the desire to keep informed during elections.

H12: Voter opinion leadership has a significant effect on the desire to keep informed during elections.

H13: Voters desire to keep informed during elections has a significant effect on voter confidence.

## **Research Design**

The study was based on the design and administration of a self-administered questionnaire. It was administered to a sample of voters in a Federal Australian Lower House Seat by-election. The survey contained items tapping voter involvement based on the work of O'Cass (2000). The seven-item scale tapped the degree of what might be termed product involvement in a conventional sense. Voter subjective knowledge was measured via a four-item scale based on the work of Flynn and Goldsmith (1999). Political opinion leadership was measured via an eight-item scale adapted from the work of Reynolds and Darden (1971). The opinion leadership scale was oriented toward politics and as such all items were reworded with politics and voting as the context. Voter confidence was measured via a three-item scale measuring confidence in choosing the right party, politician and confidence in ability to make the right choice of whom to vote adopted from O'Cass (2000). Perceived risk was measured via five items adapted from scales used by Evrard and Aurier (1996), Mittal and Lee (1989). A drop off and pick up approach was followed yielding 248 surveys and after an initial screening 238 useable surveys were retained.

## **Results**

The scales were factor analysed using principle components with oblique rotation, followed by reliability estimates of each scale. The factor analysis indicated the factor structure of the political involvement was unidimensional with factor loading between .79 and .93, with seven items explaining 77 percent of the variance, with Cronbach alpha of .95 for the scale. The subjective political knowledge and voter confidence scales were also unidimensional, with

high reliability for the knowledge scale at .91 and confidence at .82. The political opinion leadership originally had eight items, however two were removed (I often seek the advice of my friends and my friends and neighbours usually give me advice [both reversed scored]). The scale was unidimensional, with high reliability of .91. All factor loadings ranged between .58 and .91 for the factors. All constructs showed acceptable reliability of .73 or greater. The analysis of the scales showed that all the multi-item measures factor loadings were > .68 and all loadings were found to be statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . No cross loadings > than .4 were identified in the factor analysis.

Partial Least Squares was used to analyse the data. The average variance accounted (AVA) for the endogenous variables was .34 and the individual  $R^2$  were greater than the recommended .10 (see: Falk and Miller, 1992) for all of the predicted variables as indicated in Table 1. As all of these  $R^2$  estimates were larger than the recommended levels it is informative to examine individual path variances. A reasonable criterion for evaluating the significance of the individual paths is the absolute value of the product of the path coefficient and the appropriate correlation coefficient. As paths are estimates of the standardized regression weights this produces an index of the variance in an endogenous variable explained by that particular path and 1.5% of the variance is recommended as the cut off point. The results indicate all the paths exceed the variance criterion. The bootstrap critical ratios are of the appropriate size (greater than  $1.96 < .05$ ), except for perceived risk-opinion leadership, voter confidence-involvement, voter confidence-opinion leadership and information seeking-opinion leadership. Using the path weights, variance due to paths criterion and  $R^2$  values, all hypotheses are supported.

**Table 1 Partial Least Squares Results for the Theoretical Model**

Predicted variables	Predictor variables	Hyp	Path	Variance due to path	$R^2$	Critical ratio
Opinion leadership	Involvement	H1	.61	.370	.37	14.91
Subjective Knowledge	Opinion leadership	H2	.45	.300		10.05
	Involvement	H3	.36	.230	.52	7.13
Perceived Risk	Opinion leadership	H4	.14	.053		1.82
	Subjective Knowledge	H5	.35	.152	.21	4.58
Involvement	Perceived Risk	H6	.49	.240	.24	9.80
Voter confidence	Involvement	H7	.13	.050		1.54
	Opinion leadership	H8	.12	.040		1.71
	Information seeking	H13	.38	.185	.27	5.71
Information seeking	Involvement	H9	.27	.114		3.65
	Perceived risk	H10	.36	.218		5.40
	Subjective Knowledge	H11	.23	.102		2.84
	Opinion leadership	H12	-.14	.044	.43	-1.84
AVA					.34	

## Discussion

The results indicate that voter involvement influences opinion leadership and knowledge. The results also indicate that risk has a strong influence on voter involvement. There appears to be also unique differences in the domain of voter choice that are directly the result of the interaction between consumers (of politics) and the context of the marketplace they operate in (elections/politics). Also that political opinion leadership is affected by voter involvement,

and that subjective knowledge is strongly affected by opinion leadership, but this is moderated by involvement. Further, subjective knowledge was shown to have a strong effect on a voter's confidence in their political choices.

By exploring voters involvement and its role on voter opinion leadership and subjective knowledge the study has tested a relationship that, whilst expressed in the literature in consumer behaviour, has not been given the attention it deserves in voter behaviour. Overall it appears that political involvement gives rise to voter opinion leadership and also that involvement moderates the relationship between opinion leadership and subjective voter knowledge. Additionally the finding that subjective knowledge gives rise to higher voter confidence in decisions related to choice is a new finding that enhances our understanding of political choice behaviour. Further, the finding that voter satisfaction is significantly affected by the level of voter involvement is interesting and a new finding in the context of voter choice research. Whilst satisfaction is a major area of research in consumer behaviour little work has been done in the context of voter behaviour.

If the results are proven to be able to be generalised to other populations and electoral contexts the results may have important implications for political marketers, parties, public policy advocates and academics. Ultimately, the variables examined here all impact on voters' ultimate choices of candidates in an election. The strategies that are developed and implemented in a campaign by a party would be seen to differ significantly across age, gender, education and involvement. This is important, as involvement appear to influence opinion leadership (and its consequences), which subsequently influences the level of knowledge a voter believes they have and their ultimate confidence in their decision-making capacity. As such, one would see different types of information being targeted at voters with high versus low involvement. This is so because low involvement is related to lower knowledge and confidence and less information sharing (a tendency of non-opinion leaders), whereas high involvement is related to greater opinion leadership tendencies (information sharing) and greater knowledge and confidence and also greater satisfaction. One may see such strategies used in targeting the low involvement voter, as they would be more amenable to information campaigns during elections (Burton & Netemeyer, 1992). However, the outcome of targeting more heavily involved voters has always been a heated point from the public policy advocates point of view. Such voters are the most susceptible and least concerned with voting and political outcomes (least involved).

Understanding the principal reasons behind a voter's choice may help public policy makers to more efficiently solve electioneering problems and steer democracy in the right direction. It also assists in understanding the impact of marketing on voter choices and electoral marketplace behaviour. Political marketing is by far the most controversial area in which consumer research is conducted. The potential for manipulation of the voter by politicians or special interest groups is ever present. On the other hand, like other areas of consumer behaviour research, voter behaviour studies offer the promise of a better understanding of voter needs and electoral behaviour.

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