**Issue Publics in the New Information Environment: Selectivity, Domain Specificity and Extremity**

Young Mie Kim

One school of thought has argued that the majority of American citizens appear to be uninterested in politics in general (e.g., Downs, 1957) and that the level of general political knowledge is depressingly low. The other one concerns use of cognitive shortcuts and heuristics to make decisions. An alternative view that actually complements both perspectives posits that citizenry is made up of *issue publics*, or pluralistic small groups of people who are intensely concerned about particular issues (Converse, 1964).

Various specialized social issues previously regarded as relatively marginal (such as abortion, sexual orientation, racial conflict, gender, and environmental issues) compared with broad issues such as the economy now play a substantive role in mundane politics (Cook, Jelen, & Wilcox, 1993). New media allows for more information about these specialized issues.

Issue publics – small groups of people that are particularly concerned with a particular issue.

The relevance of issue publics rose as communism and the contestation between democracy-communism collapsed. Furthermore, the new media environment and decentralized media outlets had facilitated the segmenting of the public agenda. This new environment allows for a more specialized information gathering for specific issues.

The research to evaluate the impact of this change has been lacking (and of issue publics as well).

**Citizens in the Changing political and Information Environment: Issue Publics**

The most sensible trend to date defines issue publics as issues of personal importance. How important is the issue to them personally. It is different from people that are generally attentive to information about all issues and a wide range of politics, of those who exhibit large political interest, or well-educated and cognitively able to follow specific issues.

**Issue Publics Domain Specificity and Selectivity**

High level of domain specific knowledge. To the degree the people are more concerned about a specific issue, the knowledge construct is more accessible than on others (accessibility bias).

Selectivity, gathering information about a specific issue (even when external utility is low(cost benefit of gathering knowledge)).

Technological features of the web (decentralization of news mediums) allows for issue public natural inclination to look for issue specific knowledge.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Members of issue publics use media that allow a high level of selective exposure more than nonmembers of issue publics.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Members of issue publics engage in a higher level of issue-specific selectivity in information gathering than nonmembers.

*Hypothesis 2a:* The use of media that allow a high level of selective exposure is positively associated with domain-specific knowledge.

*Hypothesis 2b:* A high level of issue-specific selectivity leads to increases in domain specific knowledge when online information selection is involved.

**Issue Publics Extremity and Selectivity**

Issue publics opinion stable towards issue compared to general public. Selectivity in gathering information lead to issue opinion extremity and reduces attitude ambivalence (explain the concept of ambivalence).

*Hypothesis 3a:* Issue-relevant, selective exposure contributes to increases in attitude extremity.

*Hypothesis 3b:* Issue-relevant, selective exposure contributes to increases in extremity in candidate evaluations.

*Hypothesis 3c:* Issue-specific, selective information searching on the Web contributes to increases in the tendency for issue voting.

**Study 1: Analysis of 2000 and 2004 ANES Data**

Focus issue – abortion. Measure – the degree of importance to an individual personally.

Measured general political knowledge as well. Domain specific knowledge – identifying issue position of two candidates scale (0,1,2). Attitude extremity – agreement with statements that go away from neutral positions (hard or soft statements). Web use – election campaign information over the web, access to internet and in 2004 the frequency of web use for media purposes. Other communication variables as controls.

**Results and Discussion**

Issue public members use political radio talk shows more, but not web, talk with family and friend about politics more, no difference in traditional media use.

Web use was corelated with domain specific knowledge, political talk shows and talking with friends about politics were positive, in 2004 TV use was negatively associated. 2004 data showed web appeared to be positively related to attitude extremity while 2000 no relationship was found.

**Study 2: Field Experiment With the Combined Data Set of Web Behaviour Records and Surveys**

Field experiment (bur lab really) control and two groups – information search task group and no information search group. Recruited trough a male intercept technique. The recruitment was successful in randomizing participants across groups (227 total). CD with instructions and real environment.

The study site focused on seven issues relevant to policy legislation: abortion, affirmative action, the economy (taxes and budget), education, environment, health care, and national security.

Measures – personal issue importance (7 point). Selectivity – the number of hits of specific issues compared to the overall number of hits and by the amount of time spent out of total time spent. Domain specific knowledge -factual knowledge index on each issue. Extremity – feeling thermometers for candidates.

**Results and Discussion**

Overall, issue publics’ selectivity in information gathering on the Web was significantly higher than that of the general public in the issue domains that they considered important. As shown in Table 2.3, the findings suggest that selective information gathering merits an increase in domain specific knowledge.

Although information gathering appeared to make a significant difference in knowledge acquisition compared with the control group, a low rather than a high level of selectivity had a slightly larger effect on domain specific knowledge (healthcare). Education marginal effects.

**Selectivity extremity and issue voting.** – The data strongly support extremity hypothesis. On the basis of previous studies, the present study also hypothesized that issue publics would be more likely to use candidates’ issue positions, rather than other heuristics (such as candidates’ party affiliation), as criteria for voting when issue information is available (Hypothesis 3c). As shown in Table 2.5, the hypothesis was supported.

**General Discussion**

In a broader context, the results of this study suggest that the new information environment is facilitating rapid changes in the political landscape. Instead of traditional party politics in a representative democratic system, researchers have observed increases in the influences felt by intense special issue interest, identity politics, and single-issue politics