

User Group Information Needs: Presidential Candidate Information Gathering

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Background

In a presidential election year, Wisconsin voters will seek information on candidates running for office. It is also expected that the public will have a multitude of sources available from which to seek information and fill information needs. It is further understood that information sought will serve to assist the public in making an informed decision when voting in the Wisconsin presidential primary. It was our research group's focus to determine exactly *where* the public sought information on candidates in the 2004 Wisconsin Presidential primary. The research reported herein was concerned with what specific sources the information-seeking public relied on to learn about the presidential candidates participating in the Wisconsin primary. We chose to survey the general public and college students. Expecting to see trends concerning where college students and the general public sought presidential primary candidate information, we were uncertain as to whether those choices would be the same for the two groups of respondents.

According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003*, nationwide, 60% of eligible voters cast ballots in the November 2000 presidential election (Abstract, 2003). The 2004 U.S. Census Bureau website lists Wisconsin as having one of the country's highest voting rates at or about 70% (U.S. Census, 2004).

The University of Wisconsin-Madison's website features a "Quick Facts" student profile (UW-Madison, 2004), stating that 62.5% of the total student enrollment are from Wisconsin.

In the presidential election of 2000, a city turnout record was set with 81.3% of eligible Madison voters (including UW-Madison students) showing up at the polls (Novak, 2004). In November 2000, 47.8% of voters, aged 18-24 voted; 64.5% of 25-44 year olds voted, 73.2 % of voters aged 45-64 cast ballots, and a whopping 86.1% of voters, aged 65-74 voted (U.S. Census, 2004).

In the city of Portage, voter turn out in the spring of 2004 was slightly higher than in 2000 due to the local mayoral race. According to Portage City Clerk, Marie Moe, whenever local issues are tied into a primary, as might be expected, the turn out is higher than other primaries as indicated by the mere 27% of registered voters who cast ballots in April 2000 (there was no local primary in February of that year). In February 2004, 37% of eligible voters voted in the presidential primary.

Because of past election participation, we determined that both college students and the general public would have a desire to obtain candidate information in order to make an informed decision on whom to cast their vote in the Wisconsin presidential primary, February 17, 2004.

Demographics

The City of Madison boasts a population of 208,054, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau. The median age is 30.6 years. For census participants over the age of 25, 18.1% are high school graduates, 18.5% have some college, and 27.3% have a Bachelor's degree.

The gender split is virtually even: males make up 102, 248 (49.1%) of the total population and females 105, 806 (50.9%). The median family income of \$59, 840 is well over the national median of \$50, 046. For employed civilian populations over the age of 16, the top three occupations were listed as: 46.9%, management, professional and related occupations, 25.7%, sales and office, and 14.1%, service occupations. 4.4% are self-employed.

Population for the city of Portage stands at 9,728. The median age is 35.5 years. 40.8% of residents, 25 and over, are high school graduates, including equivalency degrees, 19.8 % have some college, 9.9% hold Bachelor's degrees. 51.5% or 5, 008 residents are male, and 48.5% or 4,720 residents are female. Median family income for Portage residents is \$44, 804. 26.5% of employed civilians over the age of 16 list management, professional or related occupations, 26.2% are employed in sales and office occupations, and 22.4% are in production, transportation and material moving occupations. Only 3.8% are self-employed.

Both communities boast an array of available information sources. The UW-Madison provides free Internet service to students. Both Madison Public Library and Portage Public Library's websites provide a multitude of links to local and general candidate information. Library patrons in both cities are afforded exposure to Internet sources and electronic information via personal computers or free Internet accessibility at their local library. Also, numerous public forums were held in Portage and Madison to increase candidate awareness through debates, question and answer sessions and the availability of brochures/pamphlets distributed by campaign workers and/or the establishment of local candidate offices.

Portage and Madison media markets carry all national and regional newspapers and magazines; national television networks and affiliates are represented, as is radio programming.

Further defining information seekers, the recently published report, "The Wisconsin Library User (and Non-User): Outcomes of a Statewide Survey", prepared for the Wisconsin Public Library Consortium, states 80% of library users voted in the 2002 Gubernatorial election, as compared with 65% of nonusers (Wisconsin Public Library Consortium, 2003).

The National Election Studies (NES), at the University of Michigan, a center for political studies dedicated to improving measurement of public opinion and political participation publishes figures as to where respondents seek out information on presidential candidates, using similar information outlets used in our survey (NES, n/d). In 2000, 82% of the American electorate turned to television for presidential candidate news. In 2000, 56% of the public turned to newspapers.

Literature Review

The information seeking and processing patterns of citizens researching political candidates is a subject that has been of interest to many scholars in fields as diverse as communications, psychology, and political science. However, very little of this work has been done within the context of library and information studies, and thus the focus of the research is not as easily applied to the profession of librarianship. In addition, little of it is solely focused on the information-seeking habits associated with political decision-making.

Information-seeking behavior is defined by Krikelas (1983) as "any activity of an individual that is undertaken to identify a message that satisfies a particular need." Voters, by their very nature, are a user group with very specific informational needs – they are seeking information on political candidates in order to make a decision during an election period. The concept of information-gathering – when information is absorbed, and then recalled on demand – also has a significant effect on the electoral decision process, but for the purposes of this study, the focus will simply be on seeking.

One of the few studies that does focus on information-searching as an aspect of the political decision process is Richard R. Lau's 1995 article "Information Search during an Election Campaign: Introducing a Processing-Tracing Methodology for Political Scientists." He recognizes that virtually all models of political behavior fail to examine the information processes inherent to the political decision-making process. Most studies of the subject, he states, focus on the type of information most people consider important to their political opinions, and few of them actually examine the acquisition process of this information.

In the course of his research, he identifies three categories of strategies that are most commonly used in decision theory research: content of search, depth of search, and sequence of search. *Content of search* refers to the information acquired during the process of searching. In the case of political research, information-seekers are interested in learning, for example, the trait characteristics of specific candidates, or their stances on particular issues. *Depth of search* indicates how far a seeker is willing to go to find the data he or she requires. There are several measurements for this according to Lau: the proportion of all the available information that was accessed, the number of alternative information sources that were considered, the proportion of acquired items devoted to the alternative chosen (in this case, political candidate), and the variance of the number of attributes considered per alternative. The *sequence of search* merely concerns the order in which the information is received, and is most often used to detect search patterns.

Another article that focuses on the information searching patterns of voters is Li-Ning Huang's study "Examining Candidate Information Search Processes: The Impact of Processing Goals and Sophistication," (2000) Instead of looking at the processes themselves, the article examines the effect that political sophistication has on these processes, and particularly the difference sophistication makes in the depth of the search and the individual decision-making strategies. Huang found that "political sophisticates," voters that were more likely to be informed about the issues inherent to a particular election, were far more likely to embark upon a more in-depth search for information than were the "nonsophisticates." In addition, she states that sophistication influences memory recall as well as comprehension, which also has implications for understanding how potential voters gather the information they require to make informed decisions.

Additional research in a variety of disciplines also touches on the information-seeking and information-processing habits of voters during elections. Baldwin M. Way and Roger D. Masters, for instance, in their study "Emotion and Cognition in Political Information-Processing," (1996) clearly focus on the psychological aspects of political decision-making, and they devote very little time to the actual process of information searching. Instead, their work's concentration is the intertwined qualities of emotion and cognition; these are certainly aspects of information-seeking that are of more direct interest to scholars in the field of psychology. The study still applies to the interests of library and information studies such that knowledge of the mental processes that are experienced during the information transformation procedure is necessary in order to fully understand the information-seeking behavior completely.

Other articles, such as Wendy M. Rahn's "Candidate Evaluation in Complex Information Environments: Cognitive Organization and Comparison Processes," (1995) focus on the comprehension aspect of information gathering. Their model assumes that the complexity of political choice leads voters to simplify candidate appraisal by

streamlining the information they receive into trait judgments. This too, is not directly related to the information search process, but instead focuses on how the information received is comprehended.

Although there has been a great deal of research in the library and information studies field into the information seeking habits of specific groups, from populations as diverse as the urban poor, undergraduates, social scientists, journalists, and genealogists, there have been few studies of this sort that examine similar patterns in the behavior of the voting public.

Methodology

Our group decided to conduct our research by using a survey designed to gather some very basic information to determine how college students and the general public sought information on presidential candidates. Our group recognized voters and others had recently completed their search for information on which candidate they preferred in Wisconsin's presidential primary election, which was held on February 17, 2004.

The group chose to survey two groups: 1. the general public living in Madison and Portage, Wisconsin, and 2. students attending University of Wisconsin-Madison. We wanted to learn how both demographic groups sought information.

To determine the information-seeking process of the two groups, we surveyed voters on the day of the primary election February 17, 2004. We visited two different polling stations: UW-Madison's Memorial Union and Portage City Hall. We decided to survey voters because the respondents had just completed their information-seeking process for presidential candidates.

Four days after Wisconsin's presidential primary, on February 21, 2004, a group member surveyed Madison Public Library Sequoya Branch patrons to determine how a second pool of respondents from the general public sought information. The Sequoya Branch is located on the west side of Madison, on South Midvale Road. It serves all residents of the Madison community, but primarily those in the immediate neighborhood. This diverse population includes young professionals, families, retirees, and graduate students. The well-developed children's section seems to indicate that young families, in particular, are a large part of the patron population. Our group believed we might gather different results from respondents who may not have been at the polls because they did not vote.

On March 1, 2004, two weeks after the presidential primary election, two group members surveyed college students at UW-Madison's College Library. The group chose to survey a second pool of college students since the results from the first group might be skewed as a result of surveying respondents who had voted in the primary election.

The survey had ten questions to determine what specific sources people used to gather information about presidential candidates (please see Appendix D for survey). The first five questions dealt with the information seeking process - when they began to search, where they searched, what source(s) they found most reliable, and what kind of information do they look for, and what information they thought libraries should provide. We anticipated people may have used more than one source to seek information, thus we designed the survey so the respondent could select multiple answers. Since the answers were broad, we included an "other: please specify" option to allow respondents to identify specific sources. The remaining five questions concerned demographics. Each question

became more personal so not to influence the respondent's answer to the previous five questions about the information-seeking process.

The survey was designed to fit on one page in order increase the likelihood respondents would answer every question. We were aware many voters only had time to answer a short one page survey. Many people voted during their lunch hour or study breaks or while they were on their way to pick up their children from daycare and go home. We perceived time was an issue at the Sequoya Library and College Library as well. Library patrons might have had a meeting, a class to attend, a bus to catch, or had limited amount of time to visit the library.

Observations February 17, 2004

Memorial Union

Almost everyone going to the polling station was an undergraduate student. Very few refused our survey. The few people that did refuse said: "I have a test, sorry," "I need to catch the bus," "No," or "No thanks." A few people were genuinely excited to take the survey. Only one person did not complete the survey. He was disgruntled about being sent to the wrong polling station yet again. A few periods of heavy traffic at the station prevented us from asking everyone exiting. Many people wanted to know how long the survey took, which we replied a short time. The entire surveying process was conducted from the hours of 4:00-4:50 p.m.

Observations February 17, 2004

Portage Public Library

Library patrons were willing to take the survey; some surveys handed out & others left at the circulation desk for patrons to take. All were completed and left at the library front desk. One patron commented "I love doing these things." Some respondents were moms waiting for their children to come out from Story Hour; others were a mix of males and females during the course of the day/evening.

There was concern that people being surveyed at the library would let their surroundings influence their answers: being in a library, a place of information, *information* in general was on the respondents mind; maybe people were not even going to vote in the primary, as opposed to surveying people at the polling place, voting was foremost on their minds. Being in the library itself offered a comfortable environment in which to complete the survey.

Observations February 17, 2004

Portage City Hall

Survey respondents were city residents of voting age; most people were approached as they exited the polling center. A few people were surveyed as they entered City Hall, prior to voting. There were a few high school students who were voting for the first time, and they took the time to complete the survey even though they needed to get back to school.

The group member surveying at Portage City hall tried to "read" people to see if they'd be open to doing a survey before approaching them; if they seemed in a hurry, avoided eye contact, or went around a different direction to enter the polling center, they weren't approached. Our group member found one aspect in her favor: being from a small community and working in a very visible location, most respondents either knew her or recognized her from her job at the library, and that made it somewhat easier to approach them and guarantee their cooperation. At the same time, our group member was afraid the public would respond in a way they *thought* she'd want them to, as

opposed to being totally honest; some people thought our group member was conducting the survey for her own library. The fact that our group member was approaching people in the middle of the afternoon (1-2 pm), in a parking lot [due to state election board recommendations that the survey be distributed at least 50 feet away from the polling entrance] was not exactly conducive to conducting a survey. Even though it was a sunny, dry day, and unusually warm for mid-February, we were still outside, in a small and busy parking lot, where cars were constantly driving in and out of, trying to find a parking space.

In both places, some people did comment that they did not understand the questions/style of survey, they didn't know if they should circle or check mark to indicate answer (poor directions on survey); older people were confused by the "N/A" for gender.

Observations February 21, 2004

Sequoia Library

The librarian requested that the group member stand close to the door, opposite the circulation desk. The library was quite busy; it was 3:30 p.m., and it was due to be open for another hour and a half. Most of the traffic was patrons waiting in line at the circulation desk and leaving, although there were also several seated at the tables in the children's section. Most patrons were fairly willing to complete surveys, particularly if it were mentioned that it was for a class. 27 out of 30 surveys were returned.

Observations March 1, 2004

College Library

First the group members went inside the library and asked a few people to take the survey. Several people agreed. Heavy traffic again prevented us from asking everyone. They were then asked by a librarian to survey people outside. It was raining today so people were rushing to get out of the rain. No one asked how long the survey took. Many people agreed to take the survey after we indicated the survey was for class and found a dry place to stand. They did not ask people who had headphones on. A few people rushed by and did not answer. Many people refused to take the survey responding "No." The entire surveying process was conducted from the hours of 3:00-3:30 p.m.

Findings

From our five survey locations we collected a total of 148 responses. Some questions allowed for multiple answer selections and some questions were not answered, so totals per question will vary (these are noted in the graphs in Appendix A). The breakdown of how many surveys from each location is as follows: Memorial Union (M-Union) had 63, Sequoia Public Library (S) had 27, Portage (P) had 13, College Library (CL) had 20, and Portage Public Library (PPL) had 25. Hence, our survey was fairly evenly distributed between the Madison area locations and campus locations with 65 and 83 respondents respectively. For a copy of the survey, please see Appendix D.

Question 1 asked the respondents when they first started learning about the 2004 presidential candidates. We got an overwhelming response to this question with over 80% having learned at least a few months ago (relative to mid-February). In fact, only one person of the 145 had learned about the candidates on the day of the primaries.

Question 2 asked where they first go for information when actively seeking it for the presidential candidates. Almost a third chose television, but newspaper and Internet tied with almost a fourth of the respondents each. Surprisingly, family and friends came in third while brochures/pamphlets, libraries, and other sources combined only produced

half the amount of responses family and friends did. In Appendix B, many of the specific sources chosen were CNN and its website, although the respondents offered a wide range of sources such as PBS, NPR, Fox news, New York Times to name a few.

Question 3 asked what of these sources does the participant find most reliable. The newspaper is still considered the most reliable source, but barely passes up television, which fell short by 2%. Comparatively, however, libraries are possibly still one of the most reliable sources of information, regardless of a direct response in question five stating the person does not trust libraries. Although only six participants selected the library as a source they would use, 7 total selected it as the most reliable source, giving it a ratio of 7:6, or 117%. The open-ended responses were fewer in number than in question 2, and the only responses that doubled were the radio, NPR, and a “combination of” sources.

Question 4 sought answers for what type of information was most often looked for. The greatest response was as to the position on topics of debate at 41% followed by political experience with over a quarter of the responses. Personal history was also popular as over 20%, or 61 people, chose it. Military experience and “other” received very minimal response comparatively. A note should be taken that position on topics of debate was significantly more important at Memorial Union while other locations were more evenly spread over the types of information sought. Added entries included character of the candidate and voting records.

Question 5 was our only completely open-ended question asking what kind of information the respondent would like to see in the library. Sequoia had an overwhelming response for pamphlets, despite the overall lack of use. This may be due to confusion while filling out the survey, asking what it means, and receiving “pamphlets” as an example. Overall, a number of responses asked for voting history and non-biased material as well as several of the selections from the previous two questions with more preference towards the focus of position on topics of debate. For a complete list of responses, please refer to Appendix C.

Question 6 started our demographic questioning by asking what age group the person belonged to. It was somewhat expected that over half of our respondents would be in the youngest age group of 18-25, since a little more than half of the surveys came from the University of Wisconsin – Madison campus. With each higher age group, the less representation is given through our survey.

Question 7 inquired as to the highest level of education completed to date. This means those who have high school level completed from the campus surveys are freshman, since their occupation (#10) is also students. 56% are still in college and a quarter of the participants were college graduates. The greatest number of the still-in-college group came from Memorial Union while the highest number of college graduates came from the Portage Public Library. Interestingly enough, the highest number of high school or less came from the Portage polling center.

Question 8 delves into gender. Our findings were virtually split half and half as is the whole of Madison, but we did have 16 more females of the 148 responses. The only location that men dominated in number was at College Library with a 14:6 split (70%). 4 people answered N/A.

Question 9 asks about respondents’ economic status. This was a very hazy question as several people had to verbally inquire as to whether to use parents’ income

versus their own. Precisely half answered as having \$20,000 or less, then the \$40,001-\$60,000 group followed at 17%. The other three levels were fairly equal.

Question 10 focused on finding the occupation of respondents. Accordingly, nearly half responded with student status. This question also allowed for multiple selections, which is important to understand because the 4 unemployed responses we received were coupled with student status responses. 30 participants associated themselves as managerial in nature, followed by 22 hourly wage earners.

In comparing the general public locations – Sequoya, Portage Public Library, and the Portage polling station – to the college locations – Memorial Union and College Library – some interesting trends appear. The general public's highest source of information was television, followed by newspapers and the Internet (Sequoya's second highest was surprisingly the Internet). With the college locations, Internet was the highest, followed very closely by newspapers then television. When listing reliable sources, television was again the highest number for the general public, followed by the newspaper and the Internet. College locations liked newspapers more, then the Internet. From these two questions alone we can see the college locations are less likely to use the television compared to the general public.

Demographically, the college locations were nearly all college students, while the other locations brought in a nice mixture of ages, salaries, and education (except for high school or less). The college locations were comparatively younger, less educated, and less paid. Our overall audience appeared to be middle to upper middle class.

Conclusion

Our research has shown that although UW-Madison students and the public at large began searching information on the 2004 presidential candidates a few months before the Wisconsin presidential primary, barely a fraction of our survey respondents turned to libraries for information. Our survey statistics indicate that 2% of survey participants go first to the library when actively looking for information on presidential candidates. A more disturbing statistic shows that less than 5% of respondents find the library the most reliable source for information, choosing instead newspapers, the Internet, television and family/friends, in that order.

We feel that although our survey respondents did not indicate that libraries provided much political candidate information, the potential is enormous for libraries to become primary sources of such information. Taking into account the comments made by participants who did use the library as a source of political candidate information, it would be fairly easy for library institutions to implement our suggestions. There is nothing to indicate that political candidate information is the sole property of one information source over another.

In evaluating survey data, the kinds of information sought on political candidates included “viewpoints on past decisions and what candidates would do and believes in doing,” “candidate's records, positions, voting history,” and “candidate's views on all subjects.” Comments of this type can be served by having libraries create small displays containing pertinent candidate information, and offering voter awareness programming. Such activities should be available early in a presidential election year. Libraries need to market themselves in such a manner that informs the public of the various information that they provide.

Further research would include surveying libraries themselves to determine what they currently do to inform the public of presidential candidates, election information and the voting process. Since quantitative data is incomplete without qualitative data to explain why some sources are chosen over others, additional research should include interviews with respondents. This kind of more inclusive research would allow librarians to more fully realize what their part in an election can, and should be – specifically, what sorts of information the public requires in their search for candidate information.

Other possible studies might examine the search patterns of citizens seeking information for an election choice; this knowledge is important in order to facilitate the most effective and efficient information searches, and this facilitation is an essential part of the librarian's function. It is key to remember, however, that the selection of an elected official – and this is particularly a presidential candidate – is not entirely dependent on impartial information sources, but also has roots in emotion and personal values, and that these factors must not be forgotten in our quest to understand the searching patterns of citizens seeking information on political candidates.

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