The Mass Media and Convention Voting Behaviour

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Although there has been considerable research\(^1\) on the impact of the mass media on voting behavior, the results appear to be contradictory.\(^2\) Explanations such as selective exposure\(^3\) or peer group influence\(^4\) are cited as mediating influences. But the problem of measuring the role of the mass media in the determination of voting choice is indicative of a more general malaise in communication research. W. Phillips Davidson and Frederick T.C. Yu argue that the field has grown so large that it lacks unifying theoretical direction and that researchers concentrate on disparate, and often picayune, problems.\(^5\)

In general, however, there appears to be two distinct, and frequently conflicting, impressions of media effects. Morris Janowitz, following his review of the literature for the International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, writes that,

In surveying the extensive research on mass communications, one finds that there are great gaps between the orientations of social scientists and those of mass medium personnel and their critics. First, there is a great difference in estimates of the effectiveness and potency of the mass medium based on the findings of social scientists as compared with the viewpoints of those directly involved in operating the channels of mass communication. Mass medium personnel, as well as their critics, tend to contend that the mass media are all-pervasive influences and powerful agents of social change. They point to the long-term consequences of the mass media in fashioning tastes and moral standards and in creating images of political leaders. While social scientists continue to differ in their particular inferences and conclusions, in general they tend to view the impact of the mass media as circumscribed. They see the mass media as limited agents of social change and as only one element among others, such as technological progress, organizational controls, cultural and ideological forms, and the processes of socialization and personality development.\(^6\)
The lack of any consensus in the findings of the various studies on media influence on politics and voting behavior indicates that findings in this field of study are tentative.

Though J.P. Robinson, in his suitably titled article, "The Press as King Maker," expresses confidence in the link between newspaper endorsements and presidential voting behavior in the U.S., Butler and Stokes in their longitudinal analysis of British partisan preferences conclude that while the press may exert some short-term influence, and have some potential for long term effects, on voting this is overwhelmed by other determinants of voting behavior.7

In the area of voting research the analysis of a general election clearly requires considerable effort and resources. Some other form of electoral activity might constitute a more revealing and manageable subject for enquiry.

Such an opportunity emerged when the Progressive Conservative party of Canada held, in February 1976, a national party leadership convention. This convention had the advantage, as the basis for a study, of being a national political event of some consequence, while at the same time involving a limited number of people.

The National Party Leadership Convention in Canada

The national party leadership selection system in Canada can best be described as a British American hybrid.8 Prior to the development of the convention system, Canadian party leaders were chosen by the parliamentary caucus, though conventions were sometimes held to choose provincial party leaders. In 1919 the Liberal party held its first leadership convention and the Progressive Conservative party did likewise in 1927. With this break from British procedure "Canadian parties opted for a leadership selection system which had the marked effect of opening up party leadership positions to non-federal and non-legislative politicians as it had in the U.S."9

Several crucial distinctions between the U.S. and Canadian systems remain however. When elected leader the Canadian official need not undergo a further electoral contest for an executive position as in the U.S.; all that is required is election to Parliament in a constituency, though his party must have sufficient support in Parliament to form a government.

Canadian conventions also differ from the U.S. model in
that there is less competition for delegate positions and that generally there are many more aspirants for party leadership than are to be found in U.S. conventions. Indeed, many of the candidates who enter the leadership race hold no hope of winning, but stand with the aim of maintaining or improving their position in the party or cabinet, or in order to make a deal with the likely winner at the convention.

This last objective is limited by what is perhaps the most important distinction between the two North American systems; delegates to Canadian conventions vote by secret ballot. This provision may reduce the power of party bosses to control the vote. In this sense "convention coalitions could exist only in a psychological rather than an organizational sense, held together by the like mindedness of delegates rather than the power of leaders." This does not mean that the party elite or the local party notables are powerless, but it does diminish their influence at the convention. This might be the reason why long-serving parliamentary party legislators are often defeated by younger and less well known figures. In fact, as Courtney says,

one excellent way of ensuring that one will not rise to the top of the Liberal party is to start at the bottom.\textsuperscript{11}

One similarity with U.S. leadership conventions is that delegates to Canadian conventions are atypical. Although many delegates in Canadian conventions are ex officio, by virtue of the party positions they hold, all delegates come from a remarkably narrow socio-economic base. Since Canadian parties generally do not maintain constituency organizations with a large continuing membership most delegates are chosen from regular activists, many of whom hold memberships purchased just prior to delegate nomination meetings. Studies of such party activists show that they come from a much more privileged sector of society than do the regular voters for their party.\textsuperscript{12} Not surprisingly, then, a similar conclusion has been reached in a study of convention delegates.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite this narrow delegate background, Smiley argues that in Canada leadership conventions have become progressively more open and democratic and suggests that this is partly due to the more comprehensive press coverage of conventions which permits more candidate coverage and publishes delegate and public opinion polls.\textsuperscript{14}

The advantages of the leadership convention for an
analysis of the impact of the media on voting decisions are numerous. Delegates are, as has been said, atypical, but this is an advantage in itself since the delegates are a politically interested and committed group, they have to choose between a greater number of candidates than is normal in a parliamentary election, and since they come from all parts of the country they have had only a limited opportunity to meet all the candidates in the contest. In such circumstances one would assume that the media would be in a particularly strong position to influence voting preferences.

It would appear that the media could influence the vote in one of three ways:

(1) Through the creation of a bandwagon effect in favour of that candidate who had been shown to be most popular among delegates and the public.

(2) Through direct press support for one or several candidates.

(3) Through the dissemination of the candidates' policy statements.

In order to evaluate the influence of the media a post-convention survey was conducted, by telephone, of 188 delegates selected randomly from the delegate list. One quarter of the delegates to the convention were ex officio by virtue of being party legislators (federal and provincial), defeated candidates, Privy Councillors or party officials; 30 per cent were under 30 years of age and 24 per cent were women.16

Findings

It could be argued that the convention process encourages a "dilemma of uncertainty affecting leaders and followers alike: discovering who everyone else thinks the winner will be and either becoming important in supporting the candidacy --a problem for followers--or striking a profitable bargain --a problem for leaders--with the candidate who seems likely to be nominated."16 In such a situation the predictions of the media might well foster a bandwagon of support. In the case of the Progressive Conservative convention this did not hold true. In the first national poll of delegates, published a fortnight before the convention opened, the eventual winner was ranked only seventh of the eleven declared candidates with a derisory 5 per cent of delegate support. Both major television networks were similarly
wrong in their polling predictions. This is made even more surprising by the fact that of the 188 delegates sampled after the convention 65 per cent said that they were committed to a specific candidate when they arrived at the convention and only 7 per cent of that number said that their commitment had changed between arrival and the time of voting. Of the small number of delegates who did change their affiliation none mentioned the influence of the media as a reason for that change.

Thus it would appear that the media certainly did not create a bandwagon effect in favour of one or two leading candidates. It is even possible that direct media support and coverage may have had a negative effect on candidate support. When Mr. Mulroney, the only major candidate who did not have legislative experience was dubbed the "media candidate" this term expressed, at the convention, a sentiment of opprobrium rather than one of approval. More significantly when delegates were asked whether they felt that media coverage of the convention was fair to all candidates 11 per cent were unsure, 42 per cent replied that it was while 47 per cent said that it was not. What is startling about this result is that it is true for almost all groups at the convention. When rank-order correlations were carried out between this variable and occupation, education, income, sex, age, province of residence, language and community size, none were significant at the .05 level. In fact the only finding of any significance was in relation to candidate support. It was discovered that supporters of right wing candidates were more likely to distrust the press.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Believe Media Coverage to be Fair/Unfair to all candidates</th>
<th>No. Expressed</th>
<th>Committed to Centre-Left Candidates</th>
<th>Committed to Right Leaning Candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D.K./Unsure</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ X^2 = 10.09354 \]

* The definition of centre-left and right wing positions are based on delegates' perceptions of their candidates political stand.

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In the case of the two most right wing candidates almost none of their supporters considered the media to be fair while supporters of the more left leaning candidates were more evenly distributed.

It is significant that almost half of the delegates considered media coverage unfair and while this does not directly relate to the impact of editorial support it does indicate that if such a substantial proportion of delegates view the media with suspicion the impact of that support will be considerably reduced.

When those delegates who considered media coverage unfair were asked why, 61 per cent said that they considered the coverage to be biased while a further 8 per cent considered much of the coverage to be inaccurate.

Such results suggest that the media's role in transmitting the policies of each candidate to the delegates will be minimized. When those delegates who were committed to a candidate, or who stated a preference, were asked the reasons for their support 25 per cent indicated that it was a result of personal meetings with the candidate, this despite the fact that no candidate could possibly meet all the delegates prior to the convention.

### TABLE 2

**BASIS OF COMMITMENT OR PREFERENCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. commitment or preference</th>
<th>24%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media coverage</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Residence of candidate</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with the candidate</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Image</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues in the Leadership Race</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Orientation of Candidate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This suggests that not only is the media's role in transmitting policy reduced by suspicion in the minds of delegates, but also by the delegates' relative lack of emphasis on policy as a basis for voting decision. Further evidence for this is provided by the fact that some of the less well-known candidates, including the winner, who received a considerable number of votes at the convention received little media coverage and that very few delegates mentioned media coverage as a basis for support of a can-
If the impact of the media on voting is marginal, and an examination of the three ways in which the media could influence voting would suggest that, at least in this instance, it was, then what factors did influence voting choice and how does that influence compare with the effects of the media?

When voting at the convention or commitment to a candidate are taken as the dependent variables then significant rank-order correlations emerge for both those variables with province of residence, age, education, occupational status and delegate ideological orientation.

What this means is that while the effects of the media seem to be minimal, other social and demographic variables do help explain voting decisions. Thus the media was not a kingmaker at the Progressive Conservative convention though they did influence the convention in other ways.

Conclusion

If the media seem less than influential in the determination of voting decisions this does not mean that they are entirely inconsequential in the convention situation. While the media are not able, perhaps fortunately, to determine who the winner will be they have transformed the leadership convention into a media event. It is obviously in the party's interest to accommodate the media since, political institutions seek to minimize responses that restrict their freedom to send and receive messages and create and direct support and skills. In all political systems, these utilities create a dependence on access to mass communications and through it to publics—in terms of both transmission and reception.

This is particularly necessary in Canada since given the extent of political and social cleavages among the population along ethnic, language and regional lines, the parties at the federal level must present themselves as parties of unity and accommodation.

Thus the parties use the media to create an image of a unified, vigorous and determined party in the minds of the electorate. In such circumstances there is little hope that delegates will be permitted to engage in policy debates or other activities which might display the very real dif-
ferences and antagonisms in the party. The delegates are, therefore, treated as residual paraphernalia with little more to do than provide applause at required times while the convention itself is tailored to suit journalists; there was one journalist for about every three delegates at the Conservative convention, to the obvious chagrin of the delegates.

Moreover, the lack of delegate participation means that coverage is centred on party leaders thus encouraging a trend towards the canalization of political debate around a small number of personalities.

Given such developments it is difficult to agree with Smiley's conclusion that the media have been one of the factors contributing to a more open and democratic convention process.

While the media do not play the role of kingmaker at Canadian conventions they do influence the convention process, perhaps in a deleterious way. Moreover, the suspicion with which the delegates manifestly viewed the media may indicate that press support in some elections may well be a liability rather than an asset.

FOOTNOTES


15. Progressive Conservative Party Press Release, Ottawa: Jan. 26th, 1976. Although the response rate of the sample was only 60 per cent the authors are confident in the results since the breakdown of the sample population was similar to that of the total delegate population in those areas mentioned above as well as in terms of actual provincial representation. The number of delegates at the convention was 2,575.
17. Ottawa Citizen, February 9, 1976. Both television networks published their poll results on the second day of the convention. The CBC placed Mr. Clark, the candidate who would go on to win the leadership race fifth in the standings while the CTV poll, conducted by one of the authors, ranked him a close third.

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