Voter turnout rates have significantly decreased over the past two decades in presidential elections (Bergman, 2002). Although in 2004 over 121 million U.S. citizens registered to vote, the largest number in years, actual voter turnout rates were still low (Gibbs, Dickerson, Bacon, & Cooper, 2004). Several organizations, universities, and celebrities have attempted to inform U.S. citizens about the importance of registering and voting. Universities have allowed voter advocacy groups to set up locations to register students on U.S. campuses and provide students with information about the registration process. Local malls also have allowed advocates to set up registration booths so citizens can conveniently shop and register at the same time. Celebrities have voiced their opinions in campaigns such as Choose or Loose and Vote or Die (Dondiego, 2004). Such campaigns are designed to educate the youngest voters of the U.S. about the importance of voting and making a difference. Although these efforts have been useful, researchers are still puzzled by the increasing numbers of registered voters but the decrease in actual turnout. Several factors have been suggested to influence voter turnout: convenience of voting, early poll results broadcasted by media, and age of voters.

People often assume convenience influences voting behavior, but few studies are available to confirm such assumptions. Bergman (2002) noted that 20% of registered voters who did not vote said they were too busy. According to States Get Creative (2002), it was reported that the convenience of voting booth locations and time frames have a significant impact on whether registered voters will actually vote. However, neither article cites any supportive data. The government has invested millions of dollars to increase the convenience of voting by establishing absentee ballots, overseas ballots, early voting, etc. The government is currently debating the use of Internet ballots to improve the voting process by making it more convenient. Although these efforts and the fact that some publications suggest convenience influences voting behavior, we believe more directly-related empirical data should be available to support the claim before our...
government invests additional time, effort, and money to increase the convenience of voting.

The media is another factor that is assumed to influence voting behavior. During presidential elections, several media outlets survey and/or poll viewers about their election opinions. Many pollsters address questions such as "Who will you vote for?", "What is your political party?", and "Who do you expect to win?" Once the questions are answered, the information is compiled and means are calculated. Based on the mean scores, pollsters broadcast which candidate is leading the race. Often pollsters neglect to conduct studies using the appropriate methodology, which leads to inaccurate and biased polls being broadcasted across the nation (e.g., Analysis, 1996; Traugott & Lavarkas, 1996; "A Meaningless Poll," 2005). We believe it is important to use random samples, unbiased questions, and to inform viewers of the methods involved. Random samples (or those using stratified random sampling) are more likely to provide researchers with opinions representing all perspectives, including moderate ones. Call-in samples (and other types of self-selection samples) often result in disproportionate numbers of extreme perspectives, because people with more extreme viewpoints are more likely to respond than moderates. For example, on February 18, 1993, a television station in Sacramento, California asked viewers to respond to the question: "Do you support the President's economic plan?" ("A Meaningless Poll," 2005). The next day, a study using better sampling techniques asked the same question and published the results in a newspaper. The television call-in poll reported that 42% of the respondents said yes and 58% said no. The second survey reported that 75% said yes, 18% said no, and 7% were not sure. Respondents to the television poll were less likely to be satisfied with the President’s plan than respondents in the second study. Such a pattern of results suggests that dissatisfied respondents were more likely to make the effort to call-in, and, thus, skewed the poll results. Although surveys and polls lead to several problems when conducted inappropriately, well-conducted polls do have the potential to provide accurate and useful information.

The possibility of inaccurate polls encouraged several researchers to investigate the influence of poll results on voting behavior. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) examined whether media poll results influenced voting behavior and found that when the polls showed a close race, the likelihood to vote increased. Aldrich (1993), Riker and Ordeshook (1968), and Hansen (2001) came to the same conclusion, and Hansen suggested the reasoning for such an increase in voting behavior is due to people believing their vote will help make the deciding factor in the political race. Tuchman and Coffin (1971) propose that media and exit polls can create a bandwagon effect or underdog effect among viewers. If a particular poll shows one candidate significantly leading the race over the other, it has the potential to create a bandwagon effect, where viewers vote for the “winning” candidate in order to feel as if they are part of the winning team. The opposite effect can also occur, where viewers vote for the candidate projected to lose the election. This creates the underdog effect—viewers vote in hopes of creating a Cinderella story election—where the underdog makes a miraculous comeback and surpasses his opponent. These theories propose that citizens do not vote based on the political campaigns, but largely due to what the majority of society is reported to be doing.

The biased polls present a problem because voters are not voting according to the political issues at hand. Biased polls are a threatening phenomenon because they suggest citizens are strongly influenced by the behavior of the majority. Such a phenomenon can severely hurt minority groups. Tavris (2000) stated that U.S. citizens do not like to be out of step and feel that it is somehow un-American to be different from everyone else. Her chapter suggests that this phenomenon is upsetting for democracy because some minorities respond by trying to persuade everyone and themselves that they are the majority. Others may respond with depression because they believe there is no point in voting because they cannot make a difference. Therefore, biased polls may create a silencing effect among minority groups and limit their potential to make a difference in elections. Among minority groups, the college-aged generation can also be negatively affected by media attention and polls.

The college generation receives a large amount of attention from the media because of their reported lack of voting. Several media outlets portray college students as the least-likely group to vote, and the older, wiser generation as the most-likely group to vote. The claim is supported by Rosenstone and Hansen’s (1993) study, which found that persons aged 45-64 years were most likely to vote and that persons in their 20s were the least likely to vote. Other research (Bergman, 2002; Watson, 2004) supports this conclusion, but interestingly, all these studies put first-time voters (18-22 years old) and the mid-to-late 20s age group (23-29 years old) into one category. Therefore, it may not necessarily be the first-time voters and the traditional college-aged students who are not participating in the voting process. In the current study, this large age group was divided into the two subgroups. The goal behind separating the groups was to determine if the
Participants

A total of 158 participants aged 18-79, from the East Texas area (i.e., Stephen F. Austin State University, local mall shoppers, and surrounding businessmen and women) volunteered to participate in the survey. Of these participants, 60 were aged 18-22 years, 28 were aged 23-29 years, 28 were aged 30-39 years, 30 were aged 40-49 years, and 30 were aged 50+ years. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that the older participants would be more likely to vote than the younger, first-time voters.

Because previous assumptions regarding the influence of convenience do not seem to have available empirical support, another purpose of the current research was to manipulate convenience and measure reported likelihood to vote. Further, we manipulated the specific point spread of polls to investigate how that might interact with convenience. Previous research (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993) only used terminology such as "close race," so it is not possible to know how specific point-spread amounts influence voting. Based on previous assumptions regarding convenience and point-spread research, we hypothesized that smaller point spreads between candidates and the greater ease of convenience would significantly increase the reported likelihood to vote. The possibility of an interaction was exploratory. We also recorded participant age so that we could investigate how age influences likelihood to vote and how the above factors might interact with age. Because voting advocacy efforts for individuals in their twenties focus on college students more so than individuals not in college, we believe that these two subgroups may show different voting tendencies. Therefore, we separated the 20s age group into two subgroups, resulting in the following age groups: 18-22, 23-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+ years. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that the older participants would be more likely to vote. We also hypothesized that the college-aged group would be more likely to vote than the mid-to-late 20s group.

Method

Participants

A total of 158 participants aged 18-79, from the East Texas area (i.e., Stephen F. Austin State University, local mall shoppers, and surrounding businessmen and women) volunteered to participate in the survey. Of these participants, 60 were aged 18-22 years, 28 were aged 23-29 years, 12 were aged 30-39 years, 28 were aged 40-49 years, and 30 were aged 50+ years. Participants were not given a stipend for volunteering.

Design

A mixed design with three independent variables (i.e., convenience, poll-point spread, and age group) was used. There were two within-participant manipulated variables (i.e., convenience and poll-point spread) and one quasi-independent variable (i.e., age group).

Convenience had two levels (i.e., easy, hard). Poll-point spreads had three levels (i.e., 2 points, 15 points, 30 points), and age group had five levels (i.e., 18-22, 23-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+ years). The dependent variable was the reported likelihood to vote, using a 4-point Likert scale indicating strongly unlikely (1), somewhat unlikely, somewhat likely, and strongly likely (4).

Materials

Four student researchers constructed a survey. Participants were first asked their age, and then were presented with six scenarios that included all combinations of the two levels of convenience (i.e., easy, hard) and three levels of poll-point spreads (i.e., 2, 15, 30). Ease of convenience was manipulated by having voting booths extremely far or close to one’s workplace, home, or shopping center; having either a cooperative boss or not; and by juggling children or not. For example, one scenario (e.g., easy, 2-point spread) was as follows: "On voting day, your boss has agreed to allow all employees to vote at the booth that is 5 min away. Recent political polls show that it is a tight race and there is a 2-point spread between candidates. For each scenario participants answered, "What is the likelihood that you will vote?""

Procedure

Four student researchers approached men and women of all ages on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University, at local malls, and at businesses within a 60-mile radius of Nacogdoches, Texas. Approximately half the participants were contacted on campus. The survey took 5-10 min to complete. An information sheet was attached to the survey explaining that all data would be anonymous and that no identifying information would be collected. Contact information also was given so that participants could contact the research advisor for any further questions.

Results

For each participant, scenario Likert scores (max = 4, min = 1) were recorded for each experimental condition. A 2 (convenience) X 3 (point spread of polls) X 5 (age group) mixed ANOVA was used to determine the influence of voting convenience, early poll results, and age group on reported voting behavior for the different age groups. All of the post hoc tests used the Tukey HSD test. The analysis of reported voting behavior led to three significant main effects but no significant interactions. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations.
for all conditions. Voting convenience significantly affected the reported likelihood to vote, $F(1,153) = 52.02, p < .01$, with greater ease of voting convenience ($M = 3.58$) leading to an increase in reported voting behavior as compared to less convenience ($M = 3.25$). Poll-point spread also significantly affected the reported likelihood to vote, $F(2,306) = 10.16, p < .01$; a 2 point spread on poll results ($M = 3.52$) significantly increased the likelihood of voting as compared to both the 15 and 30 point spreads ($M = 3.37$ and 3.36, respectively). Finally, age group of participants significantly affected the reported likelihood to vote, $F(4,153) = 2.75, p < .05$; the 23-29 age group was less likely to vote than the 40-49 age group ($p < .05$), and the 50+ age group ($p = .05$), with the latter two groups showing the highest likelihood to vote. None of the other age group differences were significant. Figure 1 shows the means for each of the age groups.

**Discussion**

The main purpose of the current experiment was to investigate the combined effects of convenience, the point spread of polls, and age group on the reported likelihood to vote. Our findings supported our hypotheses regarding the effects of poll-point spread and convenience, and they extend understanding of the influence of age group. Most importantly, by separating the 20s age group into two categories (i.e., 18-22 and 23-29 years old), we showed that these two subgroups were different in their reported likelihood to vote, unlike what had been assumed by previous studies. Only the 23-29 year-old participants were less likely to vote than those participants older than 40 years.

Also of importance, the current study supports the assumption that convenience influences likelihood to vote. We found the easier it was for individuals to vote, the more likely they would possibly participate in the voting process. As mentioned above, the government has made several attempts to increase the convenience of voting by establishing absentee ballots, overseas ballots, and early voting. Although these efforts have increased the convenience of voting, the busy schedules of American citizens under-
score the need for more efforts to increase voting convenience. One option being considered is Internet voting systems. In December of 1999, the White House directed the National Science Foundation, the Internet Policy Institute, and the University of Maryland to conduct a study on Internet voting (“Internet Voting,” 2001). According to the study, Internet voting systems fall into three categories: poll-site voting (i.e., Internet terminals would be placed at traditional polling locations), kiosk voting (i.e., Internet terminals would be placed in nontraditional locations such as malls), and remote voting (i.e., citizens could vote in the privacy of their own home or at work). All three offer the promise of convenience and universal access, but pose serious security threats. Poll-site voting and kiosk voting are of lower risk and could be easily managed by technicians. However, remote voting poses tremendous security risks (i.e., Internet hackers changing votes, persons voting under fraudulent names, etc.) that should not be sacrificed for convenience (“Internet Voting,” 2001). Although ease of convenience does seem to increase voting behavior, at this point in time the government is not ready to fully release Internet voting for public elections.

A factor to consider in future research is that personal motives could influence the perception of convenience. Motives orient and select behaviors that make one actively pursue a goal. For example, research by Sheldon and colleagues (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998) showed that individuals were more likely to attain a goal when the motivation for the goal was personally important to them. Similarly, Britt (2003) concluded that when a goal takes on a personal value, the individual becomes more focused on the completion of a goal. More directly related to the current study, Burgess, Haney, Snyder, Sullivan, and Transue (2000) found that individuals were more likely to vote when they completed a pledge card indicating a reason for voting. This research (Burgess, et al., 2000) demonstrated that individuals may be more likely to vote when they publicly commit to voting, and/or when the motivation for voting has taken on a personal meaning. Thus, it is possible that by educating the public on the importance of voting and making the process more personal, registered voters will be more likely to follow through and cast their votes even when convenience is not high.

Another factor that significantly influenced our participants’ reported likelihood to vote was the point spread of media polls. We found that only when point spreads were very close (i.e., 2 points rather than 15 or 30 points) was there a significant increase in the reported likelihood of voting and that there was no interaction with convenience. The fact that small point spreads were more likely to promote voting supports previous research (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). However, by investigating three specific point-spread levels, we were able to show that the increase in voting is not a simple, linear relationship with decreasing point spread. Although there was no interaction with our two levels of convenience (i.e., easy versus hard), it is possible that a more moderate level of convenience would interact with point spread, especially if additional smaller point-spread values were investigated. For example, what would happen to likelihood to vote if poll point spread was 5 or 10 points and convenience was easy, moderate, or hard? Our current results showed that, compared to a 2-point poll spread, a 15-point poll spread led to a significant decrease in voting likelihood regardless of convenience, but the rate at which it decreases might vary across the different convenience groups. Future research should further investigate possible interactions using additional levels of point spread and convenience.

Regardless of our levels of convenience, when poll-point spreads were further apart, participants reported they would be less likely to vote. This finding does not support the bandwagon effect suggested by Tuchman and Coffin (1971). In order for the bandwagon theory to be supported, the likelihood to vote would increase as point spread increased, and people could be surer that they would be part of the winning campaign. In contrast, the current results support the theory that voting behavior increases in a tight race because citizens believe they have an opportunity to make a difference in the race (Hansen, 2001). Often
times voters do not believe their one vote can make the difference out of millions of votes, and therefore they do not see the point in voting.

An additional factor that might interact with poll-point spread is the intensity of a voter’s feelings about campaign topics. Research (e.g., Atkinson & Birch, 1978; Biernat, 1989; Reykowski, 1982) showed that when individuals have a vested interest in an event or topic, they will be more likely to make an effort to participate. Voters who care strongly about campaign topics might be more likely to vote even if the point spreads are larger. It is important that one does not underestimate the power of emotion to motivate individuals during elections, and the power of motivation to influence voting behavior.

One way to manipulate awareness of the election and emotions about the election is through the media. When a race is close, there is often more media attention. The excitement generated by the media could potentially draw in more voters by encouraging them to make a difference and let their voice be heard (Martin, 2004). However, while the media can promote voting activity in general, if their polling methodologies are not appropriate, they may inadvertently influence the public through misinformation (e.g., the California polls described in the introduction). Whether or not media outlets misconstrue information on purpose, many citizens are not educated enough to protect themselves from poorly conducted and non-representative poll results. Often citizens rely solely on reports by the media; therefore, the media has a responsibility to accurately measure and report poll results and information regarding public elections.

Data collection for research has sampling challenges similar to those faced by pollsters. Because our data were collected using a convenience sample, the number of participants in each age group was not equal. The age group 18-22 was overrepresented with 60 participants, and the age group 30-39, with 12 participants, was underrepresented. However, because convenience and poll-point spread did not interact with age group, the unequal sample sizes across age groups should not influence interpretation of those main effects. Because data were collected near a four-year university, it is possible that our results reflect a disproportionate number of participants with a higher education. A higher education could potentially influence the results by providing participants with the knowledge and ability to understand the importance of the voting process (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996).

Despite some generalization limitations with respect to age group and possibly education, we are the first to investigate differences in the reported likelihood to vote between the two groups of participants younger than 30 years of age. Watson (2004, p.1) stated "the lack of voter participation among youth is particularly disturbing, especially in light of the number of iconic figures who encouraged youth voting in this year’s election. But at the end of the day, none of these efforts made much of a dent in pushing young folks to the polls." The age-group finding of the current experiment suggests that first-time voters/traditional college students (aged 18-22) may not be the least-likely group to vote, and campaigns targeting this age group are working, at least for individuals enrolled in college. The 23-29 age group will include recent college graduates or professionals just establishing their careers, as well as many individuals starting a family. Such individuals may be less motivated to vote because they are coping with more adjustment pressures than the younger group, and further, they have not been of voting age long enough to establish a strong voting tendency. Because the vast majority of the participants in our 18-22 age group were college students, we cannot determine the voting tendency of noncollege students in the same age group. Younger, noncollege students may be facing adjustment issues more similar to the 23-29 age group. Future researchers should further investigate voting behavior differences within these younger voting age groups using a larger and more diverse sample.

In summary, empirical evidence from the current study suggests that age group, voting convenience, and the point spread of polls each have a significant effect on reported likelihood to vote. Increasing voting behavior depends on understanding, educating and encouraging voters. There are many avenues for future research and voter advocacy programs, many of which may encourage American citizens to be more actively involved in their government and our country’s future.

References

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