

People seek balanced political information to defend their positions

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(PhysOrg.com) -- When they know they will be engaged in a debate and have to defend their positions, anxious citizens seek out a balance of viewpoints about candidates, a new University of Michigan study shows.

When they have no reason to believe that balanced search is useful, anxiety pushes respondents to view only information on the Internet from their favorite candidate.

The findings expand the scope of the debate about the impact of emotions in politics.

"Anxiety suppresses the likelihood that individuals will expose themselves to counter-attitudinal information unless they believe the information at their disposal will be useful in some way," said lead author Nicholas Valentino, associate professor of communication studies and political science.

The study was conducted in a computer lab from Oct. 14 to Nov. 1, 2004. The sample size was 305, consisting of local residents, mostly students, living on or near campus. Participants completed a pretest that included questions on media information, partisanship and values.

They were randomly assigned to conditions intended to induce anger, fear and enthusiasm where subjects are asked to recall and focus on events, people or occurrences that caused them to experience a given emotion. The respondents focused on emotions caused by the 2004

[presidential campaign](#).

The Web sites were standardized for both candidates: information was organized into issue-based and biographical information of the candidates. The Bush-Cheney site contained pages involving jobs and the economy, compassion and values, education, health care, safety and security, and the environment and energy. The Kerry-Edwards Web site contained pages on national security, economy and jobs, health care, energy independence, homeland security, education and the environment. Software tracked which specific pages on these sites were being visited, in which order, and for how long.

Participants could visit Web sites of the presidential candidates to learn about the campaign, and were allowed to switch back and forth between the Web sites to compare information. The online environment was closed, so subjects could not navigate away from the candidate sites to visit other locations on the Web.

A substantial proportion of our sample looked at information from both candidates' Web sites. Forty-nine percent of them viewed both pages, and 56 percent of partisans viewed the opposing candidate's information.

Vincent Hutchings, associate professor of political science, said although this study involved presidential candidates, the findings could be applicable to the recent heated debates about [health care](#) at town halls nationwide.

In addition to Valentino and Hutchings, Anne Davis, a doctoral candidate in the U-M Department of Political Science, and Antoine Banks, an assistant professor of [political science](#) at the University of Maryland, wrote the study.

The findings appear in the recent issue of *Political Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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