Wikipedia deemed a reliable source for political info by new study

April 14 2011

Not so long ago Wikipedia was considered a playground for Capitol Hill staffers to game the system and make "the boss look better and the opponent look ridiculous."

Now a peer-reviewed study by Brigham Young University [political scientist] Adam Brown validates [Wikipedia] as a reliable place to get a political education.

The research focused on past and present candidates for governor across the 50 states. Brown fact-checked biographical information and voting statistics and found very few inaccuracies.

"My finding is optimistic for the health of our country," said Brown, whose study appeared today in the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*. "It doesn't have to be hard to learn about the political process, or your political candidates."

When Brown conducted the study, Wikipedia contained articles for 230 of the 246 major-party candidates that ran for governor between 1998 and 2008. Brown found that all of the verifiable biographical information in those articles was completely accurate.

Even though election statistics can be tricky topics as well, Brown found that most are trustworthy. He found only four articles that reported a difference of more than 1 percentage point from the actual election result.

Brown's study was modeled after a Nature investigation that pitted [Encyclopedia Britannica](link) against Wikipedia on scientific articles. But Brown wondered whether "the free encyclopedia" would survive the heated debates and contradicting opinions of the political scene.

"The more an issue is talked about, the more people are battling over it on Wikipedia," Brown said.

The prominence of an issue is what drives up its accuracy. Brown said he found more facts missing among obscure or local political topics.

Like all encyclopedias Wikipedia should be used to get a general idea about a subject and then direct users to further sources. Most of all, Brown's study gives confidence that people can start getting more involved in politics by starting with Wikipedia.

"We don't need to worry about Wikipedia just because it's not Britannica, but that does not mean it is your stopping point," Brown said.

Provided by Brigham Young University