

Examining The Effects of Celebrity Endorsements on Voting Behavior

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This thesis examines the effects of celebrity endorsements of political candidates on voter participation among young people in the United States. Prior research has suggested that endorsements tend to negatively impact the candidate, especially among young voters and those with a higher degree of political efficacy. Through a controlled experiment survey, respondents were asked to measure their political efficacy, views on celebrities, and whether or not these two factors interacted with each other in a manner conducive to having a significant effect on their hypothetical vote. Following the survey, it was concluded that celebrity endorsements had a negative effect on the candidate being endorsed. As the participants were all young adults with higher political efficacy, it also confirmed prior research that those two factors played an important role in the endorsement's effectiveness.

The phenomena this paper will be studying concerns voting behavior. This paper poses the question: How effective are celebrity endorsements on the outcomes of elections? This question is complex as there are a myriad of factors to be analyzed that contribute to how influential these endorsements are. This question will be explored by utilizing a qualitative approach, analyzing people's underlying beliefs about politics and their opinions on celebrities.

To set up the hypothesis and survey, it is necessary to evaluate other facets in relation to endorsements. First, by understanding the goals of celebrity endorsement and the types of celebrities who endorse. There are several positive effects of these endorsements on voter decisions. However, as with any campaign aimed at getting the public more po-

litically involved, there is also significant research on the negative effects of celebrity endorsements. The research on the effects of celebrity endorsement is challenging as there are external influences that make up voters' political opinions before celebrities even enter our political sphere. Family and efficacy are already influences that voters have, and these characteristics may inform our opinions on endorsements before we encounter one. This paper will assess how voters' underlying knowledge and biases affect prior research on endorsements. Finally, this paper will also look at prior studies to see how they measured and garnered results on endorsement effectiveness. These components combined with my own analysis can help guide

Appendix may be found at:
<https://www.cpp.edu/class/political-science/participate/undergraduatejournal/vol4/miaappendix.pdf>

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research measuring the effectiveness of these endorsements, answering questions researchers have now, and guiding further research on the subject in the future.

Literature Review

Goals of Celebrity Endorsement

In the United States, actors, musicians, and other celebrities have voiced their opinion on electoral decision making, whether it be through direct candidate endorsement or advocating for policy. This has been evident since the early 20th century, with silent film actors Al Jolson and Mary Pickford endorsing President Warren G. Harding (Morello, 2001). In the past 15 years, however, politics and celebrity endorsements have become commonplace, with the public expecting notable figures to endorse a candidate, policy, or party (Jackson & Darrow, 2005). But, the measure of how significant this influence, however, is more difficult to discern. There are several factors that contribute to how influential a celebrity is over the decisions of young voters, with the most important one being political efficacy. A reason why so many types of endorsements are seen is because individuals with low political efficacy will often look for a low-cost, with low-cost meaning minimal effort, solution regarding who to vote for (Kuklinski et al., 1982; Leroy, 1990; Lupia, 1992). Atkin and Block (1983) found that the public often cite celebrities as credible sources, making their endorsements valuable. The danger in this is that politics will focus on the credibility and likability of its endorsee while focusing less on policy issues (Petty et al., 1983), especially as only 26 percent of young American voters in a study conducted by Sax et al. (1998) found that being knowledgeable on current political affairs is important (Sax et al., 1998).

Jackson and Darrow (2005) emphasize that young people tend to idolize celebrities more than their older counterparts and that if a voter is already predisposed to a certain candidate, a celebrity they admire endorsing them serves as a sort of confirmation bias. While celebrities play a role in young voters' decisions, there are also other external factors

that determine their vote. West and Oman (2002) concluded that if the audience already has an opinion on the message conveyed, they are more likely to listen to a less-credible source that confirms their opinion than an expert who dissents. The attitudes of young voters are also somewhat impressionable, and celebrities among voters this age serve not only as endorsers, but as role models as well, making the youth a campaign target. When conducting studies relating to celebrity endorsement, it is also important to eliminate celebrities turned-politicians and instead, focus on celebrities who use their existing platform to raise awareness about the political process, which was how Agina and Ekwevugbe (2017) conducted their study. This predisposition makes estimating the effects of an endorsement difficult for researchers to distinguish as you must find an endorsement's impact while keeping in mind the voter's level of support, interest group memberships, and political preferences (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013).

There are two common types of endorsements for political candidates: entertainer endorsements and political figure endorsements (Pan, 2012; and Wood & Herbst, 2007). Celebrity and political endorsements are at times polarizing when geared towards specific candidates or parties. There have been, however, non-partisan efforts by celebrities to encourage young people to register to vote. In Nigeria, there was the 'Our Time Initiative and Concert' which was held through the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, not promoting a political party (Agina & Ekwevugbe, 2017). Similar efforts have been attempted in the United States with the "Rock the Vote" and the "Vote or Die" campaigns targeting young voters, which led to an increased number of young voters going to the polls (Esser & De Vreese, 2007). Since these campaigns often feature popular celebrities, but do not include a direct endorsement of a specific candidate, their impact can still be measured based on demographics of the young voting bloc at large. Campaigns such as these are particularly effective as they often take place on social media, the primary medium of mass communication for young people, which maximizes their engagement (Chou, 2015).

Positive Effects of Endorsements

Studies on endorsements often involve various underlying factors that they tend to often offer conflicting results. However, many studies involving the effects of celebrity endorsements, most of which are cited in this paper, highlight that endorsements do more harm than good in the long run. There is, however, a significant case study in Chicago that highlighted a surprisingly positive trend in endorsements. The 2008 study of the Democratic Presidential Primary and Oprah Winfrey's effect on it provides an excellent case study. Researchers found data containing areas where Oprah's Magazine and Book Club sales were highest, and used this to determine where she had more fans. This study showed that their votes were more likely to be influenced by her celebrity endorsements. This data was cross referenced with voting records for representatives in those areas to determine political leanings; demographic and socioeconomic data; and political campaign contributions from these areas. These findings, combined with polling data, led researchers to determine that Oprah Winfrey's 2008 endorsement of Barack Obama for the Democratic Primary was responsible for approximately 1,015,559 votes (Garthwaite & Moore, 2013).

The Downside of Endorsements

Although most research in this topic points to endorsements having a positive effect on political campaigns for the most part, there can be a downside to celebrities mixing into the political sphere. For example, in the 2016 presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, a number of pornographic actors and figureheads endorsed Clinton for president, and many prospective voters disapproved of the endorsement (vok Sikorski, et al., 2016). A reason for why celebrity endorsements provide such varied results is because each individual has a different degree of political interest. The more interested a voter is in politics, the more likely they are to rely on party or policy oriented information, making them less susceptible to influence from celebrities (Schuessler, 2000). An informed voter looks at editorial endorsements, or researches individual issues they care about and sees each candidate's

viewpoints on them.

Voting populations least interested in politics are most influenced by celebrity endorsements (Veer, et al., 2008). They may see a commercial, or read in a magazine about a particular celebrity's political viewpoints, and use that to help guide their voting behavior. This is especially the case when the person holds no strong party or ideological loyalty. The nature of the endorsers themselves is important to their political influence. Celebrities that are perceived as trustworthy often have positive public images, and media coverage is responsible for that. By that logic, it can be inferred that media coverage of a celebrity is also quintessential to their alleged credibility, meaning the media can make or break an endorsement as well. When a celebrity attaches themselves to an individual campaign, instead of a party at large, these endorsements may be harmful to the celebrity and candidate at large. Young people who were shown a celebrity endorsement were less likely to vote for the candidate (Usry and Cobb, 2010). Campaign managers will use the likability and "goodness" of a celebrity to their advantage, making their endorsement seem more credible than it is (Ohanian, 1990).

The degree of credibility the celebrity possesses is also crucial to understanding their role in elections. As celebrities begin to endorse certain goods, and we see this repeated exposure, it is referred to as associative learning (Erdogan, 1999). This means that feelings we have towards the celebrity, whether positive or negative, will be projected onto the object they are endorsing (Knoll, Matthes, Munch, & Ostermann, 2016). Seeing these results, it also makes sense to infer that when we have negative feelings towards a celebrity, an adverse effect occurs.

Endorsements Versus Other Influences

While it is agreed upon that celebrities are viewed as credible sources, past studies found that celebrities are more trusted when it comes to endorsing a consumer good rather than a political candidate (Erdogan, 1999). This same study concluded that credibility alone is not enough to persuade an audience. No matter how trusted a celebrity may be, celebrity status may not matter

to some voters. A 2007 poll between USA Today and Gallup stated that 60% of adults said that celebrity endorsements were not important in their decision to choose a candidate, while 10% claimed that Oprah Winfrey's support made them less likely to vote for Barack Obama, contradicting the findings found in the Garthwaite paper (Moore, 2007). Baum (2006) and Ridley (2010) also had similar findings, that voters do not trust celebrities the same way they do political analysts.

Despite findings related to endorsements among young voters, it is also worth noting that a 2007 study (Wood and Herbst) concluded that celebrity endorsements had little to no effect on young voters compared to the influence of their families and friends. A candidate's likability is imperative to having a positive effect on the candidate they are endorsing. Celebrities reaching out to voters outside of their party were less likely to attract voters than they would voters part of their party, and this is because the voters in their party already had underlying positive feelings about the candidate. For example, a celebrity with a known preference towards the Democratic party will be better received by the Democratic voting bloc, and the same for Republicans. Individual party preference themselves can also hinder the effect of endorsements. In the United States, Democrat supporters were more likely to favor celebrity endorsements than Republican supporters (Brubaker, 2011). Republican and Independent supporters were actually more likely to support policy endorsed by a non-celebrity, nonpartisan government official rather than by a singer. Democrats' responses to the same question were opposite, but on par with what researchers were thinking as they chose the singer over the official (Frizzell, 2011). Frizzell concluded that this might be a response triggered by party identification, where Democratic respondents might have assumed the official was Republican, which was the same reason why Republicans might have favored the endorsement of the noncelebrity. Republicans may have had a bias against a celebrity musician as celebrities are often Democrats. If party identification was the trigger that made Democrats distrust the nonpartisan official, it can also be inferred that biases towards party identification were more important to Democrats rather than what the non-

partisan official was saying.

Means of Determining Endorsement Effectiveness

There are different methods that several studies employed to determine how effective or ineffective these endorsements are among voters. A study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria conducted a survey among a random sample of college students asking them their education level; age; opinions about attractive and trustworthiness of celebrity endorsers, how that corresponds with their voting behavior; celebrity versus politician endorsement credibility; and celebrity versus family credibility. The results of this study found that while young people admired celebrities, they found celebrity trustworthiness to be a concept too vague to compel voting. They also found that celebrity admiration also did not influence voting decisions. The voters were more likely to trust friends and family as they thought celebrities are not knowledgeable enough regarding governance (Agina and Ekwevugbe, 2017).

Another study measuring the effects of celebrity endorsements in the United Kingdom gathered a random sample of 316 participants in the English cities of Bath and Bristol (Veer et al., 2008). Their methodology involved respondents filling out a questionnaire regarding their political salience, or how politically knowledgeable they are. After the questionnaire, the participants then saw advertisements involving a celebrity endorser and a non-celebrity endorser. Half of the respondents chosen were younger than 28 years of age. The respondents were asked to complete Ohanian's (1990) traditional model of rating trustworthiness, knowledgeability, and persuasiveness among celebrities. Additionally, the researchers also had respondents rate the celebrity's familiarity and attractiveness. They also completed a political salience scale as well, demonstrating how knowledgeable or involved they were in politics. The results demonstrated that the lower someone's political salience is, the more receptive they are by celebrity endorsements. If their political salience is higher, the effect of the endorsement is nonexistent (Veer et al., 2008).

A third study conducted in Taiwan measured the effect of celebrity versus governmental en-

dorsements. It compared the endorsement of the president of the Central Bank of Taiwan to the endorsement of a popular movie star. There was also an addition of a fictitious regular citizen endorser. They were rated by awareness, or celebrity status; attractiveness; and political expertise. The political figure had the highest expertise, the actor had the highest attractiveness, and the citizen had the lowest awareness. 60 percent of respondents believed the three people were originally politically neutral, so their endorsements would be plausible without too many biases. The results of the study stated that the endorsements of the political figure and celebrity increased the voter's positive reactions to the ad, endorser, and party attitudes. In all those scenarios, the non-celebrity scored the lowest. The non-celebrity endorser did score higher in a metric measuring relatability, with voters placing that below expertise, but considering it more relevant than attractiveness. This study, in conjunction with past research, also concluded that political awareness and party loyalty make endorsements insignificant in terms of effectiveness or crossing the aisle (Chou, 2015).

Hypothesis

Prior research suggests that there is a negative relationship between celebrity endorsements and a voter's likelihood to vote for the candidate being endorsed. This is especially prevalent amongst young voters (Usry and Cobb, 2010), and voters who have high political efficacy (Schuessler, 2010). These endorsements, while helpful at guiding those less knowledgeable on politics, therefore more impressionable, are a gamble for campaigns who are sometimes hurt by celebrities getting involved. Despite studies that have discovered positive relationships between endorsements and voting, there is insufficient evidence to confidently state that these campaigns are more harmful than beneficial. This has led me to hypothesize the following:

- *Hypothesis 1: I believe that celebrity endorsements will negatively impact a candidate's chances of winning an election.*

Conversely, the null hypothesis of this paper is that celebrity endorsements have no effect on political

campaigns, neither improving nor worsening their chances of winning an election.

Methodology

This paper utilized a quantitative approach, with a survey experiment as the source of data in order to successfully and accurately test the hypothesis. In this quantitative approach, the paper aimed to see if the dependent variable, voter behavior, was negatively impacted by the independent variable, celebrity endorsement. There were a total of fifty-four respondents, all of them students within the Political Science Department at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. There were two groups of respondents, with 28 in the control group and 26 in the treatment group. Both groups were asked an identical set of seven questions,

but in addition, the treatment group received an additional question following an endorsement at the end of their survey.

The first two questions I asked respondents of both groups were in regards to demographic information. Moreover, I asked them to identify their age and gender. Both groups had a large majority of participants aged 18-29, comprising 92.9 percent of the control group and 96.2 percent of the treatment. Only two responses of the control and one of the treatments fell outside of that demographic at ages 30-49. Please see appendices A and B for more information. This was important as my study predominantly focused on the opinions of young voters.

Next, I asked for the gender of the participants. My reason for this is because knowing the gender of the respondents helps put into context the overall answers to the questions of if gender plays a role in how affected by endorsements the respondents are. In both groups, the respondents were also overwhelmingly female, making up 75 percent of the control and 80.8% of the treatment groups. The treatment group was solely binary with 21 female responses and 5 male, whereas the control group had 21 female responses and 5 male responses as well, but included 1 respondent who preferred not to say and another who identified as "other."

After asking for demographic information I

proceeded to ask for the political ideology of each respondent. This was also important to the study as conservatives tend to have a less than favorable view of celebrities, and are also less likely to listen to a celebrity endorsement than a liberal (Brubaker, 2011). Following their ideology, I sought to measure the political efficacy of each respondent. Since efficacy asks if an individual is able to understand and believe they influence their political system, I asked two questions that could measure both of those parameters. First, I asked how often each respondent read the news, in order to see how often they concerned themselves with public affairs. This helped assess if they heard about candidates' policies through highlights on campaign speeches or debate, and how often they read this information. I measured political efficacy by asking each respondent how interested they are in politics. Since each respondent was a political science student, I expected each response to be either actively or moderately interested in politics. I still chose to ask the question in order to ensure this was correct. After measuring political efficacy, the next question asked for the respondents' views on celebrities. Gauging their overall impression of celebrities was important in order to compare it to the effect an endorsement would have on a campaign in the treatment group, and to compare that result to the opinion on celebrities in the control group.

The final question for the control group, but the second to last question for the treatment, involved asking for respondents' opinion on a made-up candidate. The candidate, named Raymond Morrison, was a congressional candidate running for Congress in the state of California. His platforms were mainly progressive, supporting Universal Health Care and Sensible Gun Control. I then asked the respondents how likely they were to vote for him. This concluded the survey for the control group.

The treatment group received one additional question. I devised a hypothetical endorsement, saying actor George Clooney had appeared on the Today Show to endorse Morrison. I chose Clooney to represent the endorser because he is a celebrity well known for his activism and human rights advocacy. After the endorsement, I once again asked how the respondents would vote for Morrison now that they know this information. The next section

of this paper will examine the results of the two surveys and explain how they relate to the research question.

Results

It is imperative to reiterate that all respondents in this study are political science students, meaning that they will mostly all have a higher degree of political efficacy, therefore not as easily persuaded by a celebrity endorsement. In the methodology stage, I included the demographics of the respondents in order to give the context of age and gender to the responses concerning ideology, efficacy, and opinions. After conducting this survey, I was able to assert that the hypothesis was correct. The tables and diagrams will further divulge the survey answers and how they help reject the null hypothesis.

Political Ideology

For the question asking respondents to state their political ideology, both groups had a varied response. However, the control group was about 9 percent more liberal and twice as moderate than the treatment. The treatment group had larger percentages of conservatives, independents, and others as well, making this group generally more diverse. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 present breakdown of the different identifiers used based on political ideology.

Measuring Efficacy

These next two questions were used to measure political efficacy. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 Present how often the respondents read the news. The dominant response in both groups was "a few times a week." 50 percent of people in the control group reported that they read the news at least once a day, while the treatment only had about 34 percent of daily news readers. Only approximately 17 percent in both groups read the news once a week or less.

The second metric used to measure efficacy was to ask for the participants' overall interest in politics. Demonstrated in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, there was some degree of political interest among each

respondent. This was not surprising, given that each respondent was a political science student. Only 10.7 percent of control and 11.5 percent of treatment responses stated they had minimal interest.

Opinion on Celebrities

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 represent the respondents' feelings towards celebrities. The vast majority of both groups believed celebrities were influential and that they can affect the culture at large, positively or negatively, with their actions. Approximately 16 percent of both groups believed celebrities were only influential when it comes to using their fame for good, and 7.1 percent and 19.2 percent of responses in the control and treatment groups respectively believed celebrities were not important.

Figure 1.1: Control Group Responses to “What is your political ideology?”

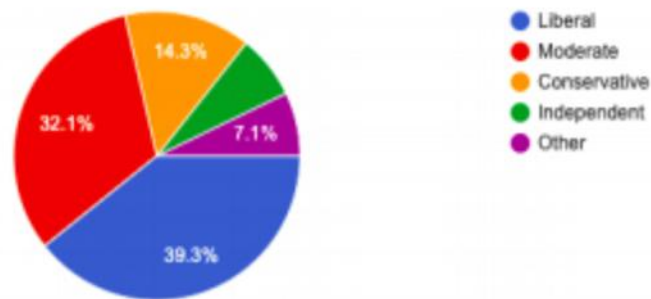


Figure 1.2: Treatment Group Responses to “What is your political ideology?”

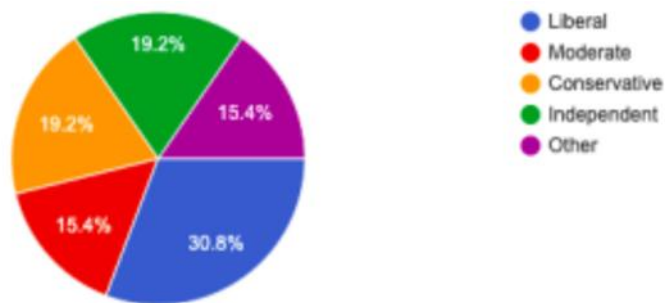


Figure 2.1: Control Group responses to “I read the news...”

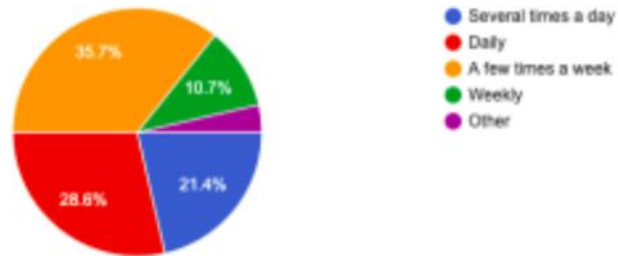


Figure 2.2: Treatment Group Responses to “I read the news...”

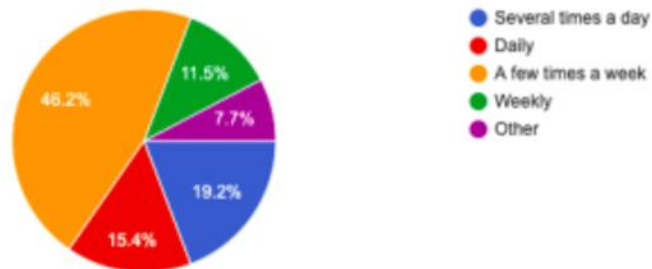


Figure 3.1: Control Group Responses to “My interest in politics is...”

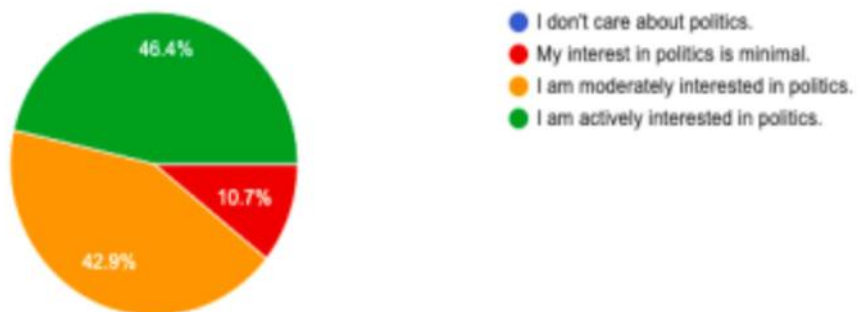


Figure 3.2: Treatment Group Responses to “My interest in politics is...”

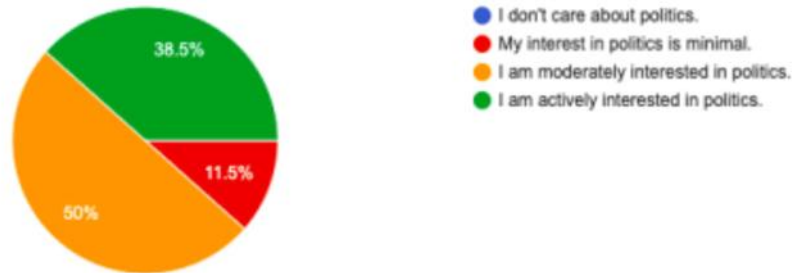


Figure 4.1: Control Group Responses to “I think celebrities are...”

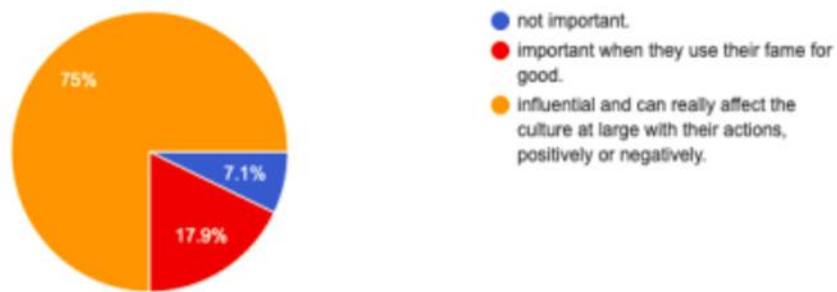
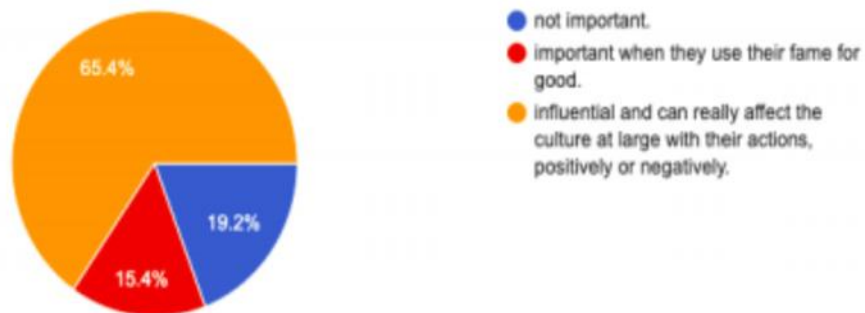


Figure 4.2: Treatment Group Responses to “I think celebrities are...”



Voting Likelihood

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 asked the respondents to state their likelihood that they would vote for Raymond Morrison for Congress. The control group responses had a majority vote for “somewhat likely,” and also had been almost split with the remainder for very and not likely. For the treatment group, their responses were more varied, likely because of their varied responses asking for their political ideologies. Their likelihood of not voting for Morrison increased, while the response of “somewhat likely” decreased by 15.1 percent. The responses of “very likely” also increased by 1.4 percent. This concludes the survey for the control

group. I devised two groups in the experiment to ensure that the responses were about the same in both groups, and that one would not be skewed one way or another. Although the responses in both groups did not greatly vary, the respondents in the treatment group were a little more varied, which was beneficial to the study and in anticipation of the last question.

Response to Endorsement

After asking the likelihood that the respondents would vote for Morrison, the treatment group was asked one final question. I stated that Morrison had been endorsed by George Clooney, who went

Figure 5.1: Control Group Responses to “Raymond Morrison is running for Congress in the state of California on the platforms of Universal Healthcare and sensible gun control. How likely are you to vote for him?”

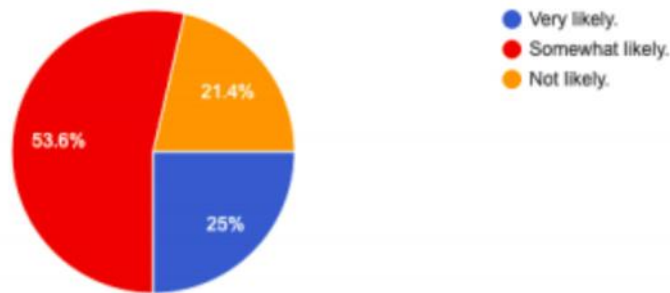
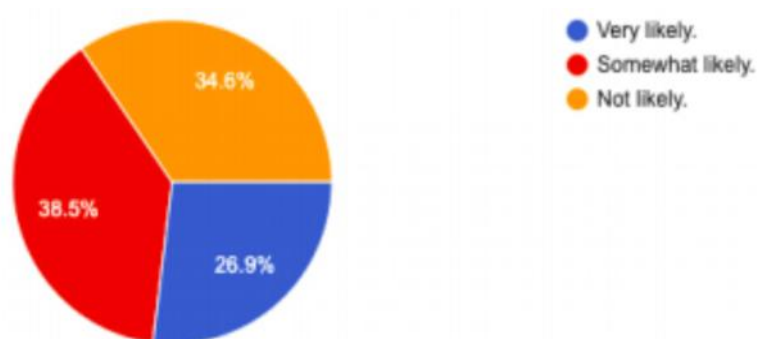


Figure 5.2: Treatment Group Responses to “Raymond Morrison is running for Congress in the state of California on the platforms of Universal Healthcare and sensible gun control. How likely are you to vote for him?”



on the Today Show to publicly state his support. Following the endorsement, the percentage of respondents who selected that they were now “not likely” to vote for Morrison almost doubled to 65.4 percent from 34.6 percent. While this was to be expected given their age and political efficacy, I did not expect such a drastic jump, nor did I expect the other two categories to decrease so drastically.

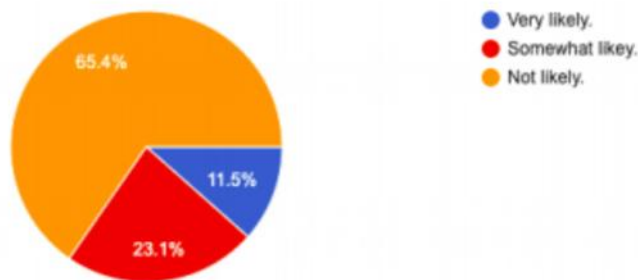
These findings are consistent with the two studies that guided my hypothesis. The respondents in my survey were young voters and demonstrated a strong understanding and interest in politics. Because of this, the celebrity endorsement had a severely negative impact on the campaign. Political ideology also had an impact on responses as each respondent who identified as conservative voted “not likely” before and after the endorsement, likely because of Morrison’s progressive policies. Clooney’s endorsement also led each respondent to either remain the same, or negatively impact each respondent’s decision, as noted in Appendix B.

Conclusion

It is evident that that age and political efficacy had an effect on the influence of celebrity endorsement. There is also some certainty that celebrity endorsements negatively impact political campaigns. As demonstrated by the two groups of survey respondents, both of which had respondents from different political backgrounds

and opinions on celebrities, by sharing a similar age and political interest, these findings contribute to past scholarly findings that present that celebrity endorsements harm a campaign in the long run. The survey experiment allowed me to reject the null hypothesis, and help further solidify the conclusions of the two studies from which I developed my hypothesis. I was surprised by the large number of respondents who voted they were not likely to vote for Morrison following the endorsement, which almost doubled. Despite my surprise at the amount by which support decreased, it was consistent with prior evidence. This additionally allowed me to accept my hypothesis, which was that a celebrity endorsement negatively impacts a candidate’s chances of getting elected. Since this survey was conducted on political science students, using efficacy as a metric to measure their likelihood was also bound to lessen the influence of the endorsement. After the study, it also not only lessened the influence, but made the perceptions of the candidate worse. These students instead chose to vote with their knowledge, viewing celebrity endorsements as pandering for their vote. In his 2004 presidential campaign, Senator John Kerry received an endorsement from fellow Senator Gary Hart. When asked whether or not his endorsement would mean anything, Hart responded that in the eyes of the voters, it means nothing. Knowing not only the insignificance, but also adverse effects of celebrity endorsements leads to a more complex question, which is: why are there so many celebrity endorsements if they don’t work?

Figure 6: Treatment Group Responses to “Morrison has been endorsed by George Clooney, who appeared on the Today show to voice his support for Morrison. Knowing this, how likely are you to vote for Morrison?”



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