

**RUNNING HEAD: Perceived Effects of Media Coverage of Election Polls**

Examining the Perceptual Gap and Behavioral Outcomes in Perceived Effects of  
Coverage of Media Polls in the 2008 Taiwan Presidential Election

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## Abstract

The ubiquity of polls in elections has led to decades of research on the impact of polls on the public. This study examines impact of news about polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election from a third-person effect perspective. Results of a survey using a random sample of 1,079 college students indicate that they perceived news about election polls to have a greater effect on others than themselves regardless the effects were perceived as negative or positive. Furthermore, findings show that attention to election poll news enhanced the perceived positive effects on self and others. In addition, poll credibility was found to be linked to perceived effects on self and others. The less credible elections polls were thought, the larger the self-other perceptual gap. Finally, concern about the negative effects of election poll news on others was found to trigger protective behavior. However, perceived positive effects of such news on self resulted in discourse engagement about the election.

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Election polls, third-person effects, perceived credibility, discourse engagement

### Examining the Perceptual Gap and Behavioral Outcomes in Perceived Effects of Coverage of Media Polls in the 2008 Taiwan Presidential Election

#### Purposes of the Study

Polls play an important role in American elections with a 200 plus-year history (Lavrakas & Traugott, 2000). Modern elections are characterized by the ubiquity of polls. Election polls may be highly influential when they are widely covered in the news media. For news organizations, polls are instrumental in the coverage of elections for they seek to beat competitors in being the first to predict winner of a race. Mason, Frankovic, and Jamieson (2001) described poll-driven coverage of elections as “an archetypal news norm,” making poll **reports** a type of distinctive **media** message in its own right (Pan, Abisaid, Paek, Sun, & Houden, 2005).

However, research shows that poll-generated stories tend to be based on faulty methodologies and were outright wrong in predictions (Rhee, 1996). This has been the case in Taiwan. In the 2004 presidential election, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party candidate Chen Shui-pian lagged by double digits in polls behind the Kuomintang challenger Lien Chan in the last week of the election. The *United Daily News* and *China Times*, two of the three largest circulated newspapers on the island, predicted that the incumbent would lose. However, he won the election by a narrow margin. Scholars argued that the gap between poll predictions and actual election results hurt the credibility of news organizations (Chen, 2008).

Focusing on news about election polls in the 2008 presidential race in Taiwan, this study will investigate public opinion about such news from a third-person effect perspective. Specifically, it will examine the perceptual gap of news about election polls on self relative to others. In doing so, the perceived negative and positive effects of election poll news will be explored. In examining the effect of perceived negative and positive effects of news about election polls, the role of media use and credibility of polls in mitigating the third-person perception will be assessed. Finally, this study will test the consequence of self-other

perceptual bias on behavioral outcomes: does greater perceived negative effects lead to stronger support for restrictions on reports of election poll? In addition, whether perceived positive effects of such reports result in civic discourse engagement will be probed.

Past third-person effect research paid a great deal attention to controversial or socially undesirable messages such as violence and pornography. Few studies have considered the presumed impact of media contents that are not straightly negative or positive. Therefore, findings of this study will contribute to the third-person effect research in applying the theory to study a type of media message which provides useful information to voters but may also harm them at the same time. In addition, by focusing on discourse engagement about the campaign as a behavioral outcome of the third-person perceptual disparity, findings will expand the research on the behavioral component of the third-person hypothesis.

### Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

#### The Third-person Perceptual Gap

In assessing effects of media message on oneself relative to others, there is an enduring and fascinating phenomenon. As Davison (1983, p. 3) put it, “people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others.” The phenomenon has been theorized as the third-person effect, which includes a self vs. other perceptual component and a perception-driven behavioral component.

Over the past 25 years, the third-person effect hypothesis has garnered a large amount of empirical research, which broadly supports it (Perloff, 1993, 1999; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000). Previous research demonstrated stronger third-person perceptual effects in negative, undesirable or persuasive media messages such as pornography (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2002), violence (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2002; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Salwen & Dupagne, 2001), controversial news reports (Salwen & Driscoll, 1977), controversial advertising (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Huh, DeLorme, &

Reid, 2004; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998; Youn, Fabor, & Shah, 2000), and negative ads in political campaigns (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden, 2005; Wei & Lo, 2007). The generalization is that the more negative the media content, the larger the perceptual gap between self and others. As Gunther and Mundy (1993) put it, when a message is not perceived to be beneficial and involves large risks, the third-person perceptual gap will be unequivocal.

However, when messages are socially desirable such as public service ads, reverse third-person effect (also known as the first-person effect) was found (Gunther & Thorson, 1992). People are willing to admit to be more influenced by positive messages than others. In the context of reports of election poll, which can be faulty and biased, public perceptions of the impact of poll-driven news on self vis-à-vis others will differ.

H1: Respondents will perceive news about election polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race to have a greater effect on others than on themselves.  
Differentiating Perceived Media Message Effects into Negative and Positive

Recent years of third-person effect research have witnessed increasing attention to apply the third-person hypothesis to examining perceived impact of media messages that are mixed. That is, media messages which are ambiguous because they contain both informational benefits and risks. For example, in reading news about the bird flu, the coverage was informative and educational. Wei, Lo, and Lu (2008) found that the more respondents read or watched bird-flu news, the stronger the impact they perceived such news on self and others, reducing the self-other perceptual gap.

Studies on direct-to-consumer (DTC) drug ads (DeLorme, Huh, & Reid, 2006; Huh, DeLorme, & Reid, 2004, 2005) show that such ads were thought to be informative. Consumers perceived both positive and negative effects in DTC advertising. Older consumers were more positive about them and viewed more informational usefulness than negative effects in DTC ads. However, they tended to believe that DTC ads exert a greater influence

on other people, not themselves, viewing others as being more vulnerable to the negative effects of DTC drug advertising (Huh et al., 2004). DeLoreme, Huh, and Reid (2007) argued that older consumers' frustration toward specific DTC drug ads – despite positive perceptions toward the general idea of DTC advertising – operates behind denial of DTC drug ad effects on themselves.

In the context of reports of election poll in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race, it is expected that the public will perceive the negative and positive effects of the news on themselves and others differently. That is, the third-person perceptual gap will be greater if people view news about election polls as harmful to voters. On the other hand, they will perceive a smaller self-other perceptual gap if they view such news as beneficial to voters.

- H2: The third-person perceptual gap will be smaller if people view news about election polls as beneficial to voters in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race. On the other hand, the perceptual gap will be greater if they view such news as harmful to voters.

### Third-person Perception and Media Use

Why and how does the third-person perceptual gap occur? Comprehensive and one-for-all explanations are not available, but a few theoretical mechanisms are established to account for the self-other perceptual disparity such as self-serving bias (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Perloff, 1999), social distance (McLoed et al., 1997), self-categorization (Reid, Byrne, Brundidge, Shoham, & Marlow, 2007), and uncertainty reduction (Pan et al., 2005), among others. Past research has identified media use as a contingent variable. Salwen (1998, p. 264) suggested that media use may “amplify” the third-person perceptual bias because people learn from media use. Generally speaking, the more knowledge people know about the content, the more certain they are in assessing harms of such content on self and on others.

Past studies (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990) reported media use as a significant predictor of perceived media effects on self and others. TV viewing was found to be positively related to perceived effects of political messages on self, while greater newspaper exposure was

positively associated with greater perceived effects on others. The presumed influence of media use on others was found greater than that on self in predicting self-enhancing reactions in recent studies. Gunther and Storey (2003) reported that exposure to radio drama was positively related to presumed influence on others. Park (2005) found that reading beauty and fashion magazines increased an individual's desire to be thin due to the perceived influence of the thin ideal on others. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H3a: Exposure to news about election polls will be significantly related to perceived effects of such news on self and others. Specifically, exposure will be negatively related to perceived harms on self and others but positively related to perceived benefits on self and others.

Moreover, previous research (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Weaver & Drew, 1995; Wei & Lo, 2008) has consistently shown that attention, as a more elaborative measure of information processing, results in a greater learning effect than exposure. Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner (1994) reported that attention to TV news was a significant predictor of knowledge about candidates in the 1992 presidential election. Sotirovic and McLeod (2004) found attention to campaign news in newspapers and on national TV significantly predicted knowledge in the 2000 presidential election. Drew and Weaver (2006) examined the relationships of exposure and attention to various news media and found that attention to TV news and Internet news predicted voter learning about candidates' positions on issues. In estimating the impact of news about polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election, it is expected that the more attention respondents paid to such news, the greater the positive effects of the news they will perceive on self and on others.

H3b: Attention to election polls-based news will be significantly related to perceived effects of such news on self and others. Specifically, attention will be negatively related to perceived harms on self and others but positively related to perceived benefits on self and others.

#### Third-person Perception and Media Credibility

Past research also identified media credibility as contingent variable, which mitigates the self-other perceptual gap. The construct of credibility, a characteristic of information, source

or the media, refers to whether the source, information, or the medium is perceived to be trustworthy and truthful (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). It has been examined in three domains: (1) source credibility (e.g., trustworthiness, expertise, accuracy, fairness, and believability); (2) medium or channel credibility (e.g., the truthfulness and believability of a given medium); and (3) content credibility (e.g., the truthfulness and believability of the message)(Kiousis, 2001; Soh, Reid, & King, 2007).

Previous research has shown that media credibility affects the third-person perceptual gap. The pattern is that the self-other perceptual gap increases as credibility decreases. Several studies empirically demonstrated the relationship between credibility and the self-other perceptual gap. Gunther (1991) found a greater self-other perceptual differential in assessing the harms of *National Enquirer*, which is non-credible as compared to the *New York Times*. People tended to perceive others to be more negatively influenced by the tabloid than themselves. Johansson (2005) also explored the relationship using data collected in Sweden. He found that the third-person perceptual differential increased for mass media with lower credibility. In assessing the perceived effects of blogs and traditional media, Banning and Sweetser (2007) reported that the extent to which respondents thought themselves and others to be affected by blogs and traditional media was related to how they would believe in them. They compared the self-other perceptual gap across four media sources: personal blogs, media blogs, online news, and print newspapers. The third-person perception bias was found across the media. Moreover, they found that online news had a larger perceptual gap than print newspapers because online news was viewed as less credible.

In sum, media credibility mitigates the third-person perception. When people perceive a message or a medium to have low credibility, they will believe others are more likely to be influenced by the message or medium than themselves. On the other hand, when credibility is high, the self-other perceptual gap narrows. The above review leads to the next hypothesis,



which examines how perceived credibility of election polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race will likely affect the third-person perceptual gap.

- H4: Credibility of election polls will be significantly related to perceived effects of news about election polls on self and others. Specifically, the lower credibility, the greater perceived negative effects on self and others. On the other hand, the higher credibility, the greater perceived positive effects on self and others.

#### Third-person Perceptual Gap and Behavioral Outcomes

The self-other perceptual gap has consequences for behavior: people tend to act on their perceptions albeit the perceptions are biased. As Gunther & Storey (2003) argued, people who assume influences of media messages on audience will adapt their behavior to correspond to those assumptions. Past research exploring the behavioral component of the third-person effect consistently shows that people are more likely to act if they believe that others are more susceptible to harmful effects than themselves. In the context of perceived harms of negative and controversial media contents, the third-person perceptual gap as an antecedent predicted support for censoring or restricting such contents for the sake of protecting the vulnerable others (Gunther, 1995; Hoffner, Buchanan, Anderson, Hubbs, Kamigaki, Kowalczyk, et al., 1999; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2002; Lo & Paddon, 2001; McLeod, Detenber, & Eleland, 2001; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Wei, & Lo, 2007; Youn et al., 2000).

In a recent study, Sun, Shen, and Pan (2008) argue that audience specific rectifying behaviors due to the self-other perceptual gap will be aimed at restricting messages with negative influence, correcting messages with ambiguous influence, and amplifying messages with positive influence. Considering media coverage of polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election has both negative and positive effects, it is anticipated that greater perceived negative effects will lead to stronger support for restrictions on reports of election poll, while greater perceived positive effects will lead to less support for such restrictions.

- H5: Perceived negative effects of news about election polls on self and others will be

better predictors of support for restrictions of such news than perceived positive effects on self and others.

Finally, recent research has expanded the behavioral outcomes of the third-person perceptual gap to likelihood of developing an eating disorder (David & Johnson, 1998), intention to relocate if people believed that others were affected by media coverage of their town than they were (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003), likely interaction with health workers (Gunther & Storey, 2003), increased desire to be slim (Park, 2005), and intention to seek health information and immunization vaccines (Wei et al., 2008).

In the domain of political and civic participation, Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2002) found that the third-person perception was positively associated with respondents' behavioral intention in civil participation such as discussions of election and voting. Those who believed others were more easily persuaded than themselves showed a higher likelihood to vote. Golan, Banning, and Lundy (2008) also found that the third-person perception predicted voting likelihood. **They argued that the overestimation of political advertising effects on others motivated individuals to go to the voting stations.** Banning (2006) also explored the third-person perception and political participation. However, his study showed a reduced likelihood of voting in the 2004 U.S. presidential election among those that exhibited a greater third-person perception regarding general media effects.

The mixed findings may be due to a lack of differentiation of perceived positive effects of media messages from negative effects. To address inconsistency, the perceived positive and negative impacts of media messages are explored in this study. Specifically, in reacting to the positive and negative effects of reports of election poll in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race, it is expected that the perceived positive effect of polls news will likely be associated with campaign engagement behavior. That is, the more news about election polls is believed to have positive effects on self and others, the more likely the respondents will seek additional information about the polls and discuss them with others. On the other hand, the

more reports of election poll are believed to have negative effects on self and others, the less likely the respondents will seek additional information about the polls and discuss them with others.

- H6: Perceived positive effects of news about election polls on self and others will be better predictors of campaign discourse engagement than will perceived negative effects of such news on self and others.

#### Method

Data used for hypothesis-testing were collected from a large-scale survey with a probability sample of college students in Taiwan, where a presidential election was held on March 20, 2008. Using a multistage cluster sampling plan, respondents were drawn from ten randomly selected colleges from a pool of 147 colleges in Taiwan. Three classes were randomly chosen from each of the ten colleges. With prior permission of instructors, self-administered questionnaires were distributed in the selected classes during a two-week period in March 2008 prior to the presidential election. Participation was voluntary; respondents were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Of the 1,126 students selected in the sample, 1,079 (95.8%) completed the survey.

Of the sample, 52.1% were males and 47.9% were females. Their average age was 20.3 years old ( $SD = 1.47$ ). The distribution of years of study was roughly even. More than one-fifth (21.3%) were freshmen, one-third were sophomores (33.7%), one-third of juniors (32.2%), and the rest were seniors (12.7%).

#### Measurement of Key Variables

*Exposure to news about election polls.* Respondents were first asked about how often they read or watched election poll-based stories in newspapers, on TV or on the Internet. The scale was 4-point ranging from “never,” “rare,” “sometimes” to “often.” Results of an exploratory factor analysis show a single-factor solution, indicating the three items measured the same underlying concept ( $Eigenvalue = 2.30$ , explain 76.58% of the variance). A

composite scale of exposure to news reports of election poll was built by averaging the three items ( $M=1.79$ ,  $SD=.77$ ,  $\alpha=.85$ ).

*Attention to news about election polls.* Respondents were then asked about the amount of attention they paid when reading or watching election poll-based stories in newspapers, on TV or on the Internet. The scale was 5-point ranging from 1 (“no attention”) to 5 (“a lot of attention”). Results of an exploratory factor analysis show a single-factor solution, indicating the three items measured the same underlying concept ( $Eigenvalue=2.53$ , explain 84.21% of the variance). A composite scale of attention to news reports of election poll was built by averaging the three items ( $M=2.25$ ,  $SD=.94$ ,  $\alpha=.91$ ).

*Credibility of election polls.* To measure credibility of media polls, respondents were asked to rate the truthfulness of presidential election polls reported in newspapers, on TV, and on the Internet. The response categories ranged from “1” (“very untruthful”) to “5” (“very truthful”). Results of an exploratory factor analysis showed that the three items grouped in a single factor ( $Eigenvalue=2.56$ , accounting for 85.25% of the variance). The three items were added and divided by three to create a composite measure of “credibility of election polls” ( $M=2.32$ ,  $SD=.86$ ,  $\alpha=.91$ ).

*Perceived effects on self.* To measure perceived effects of news about election polls on self, both negative and positive, six items were used using a 1-5 point scale where “1” means “no influence at all” and “5” means “a great deal of influence.” The items were based on pretests. Specifically, respondents rated their level of agreement on the following statements: “How much do you think viewing news reports of 2008 presidential election poll has (1) misled your understanding of the election campaign, (2) affected your desire to vote, (3) made you dislike the election campaign, (4) helped you understand candidates’ actual fit for the presidential office, (5) helped you know candidates’ position on various issues, and (6) helped you know key issues in this presidential election.

A two-factor solution emerged from a principal component factor analysis, explained 76.17% of the total variance. The first factor, which accounted for 41.48% of the variance (*Eigenvalue*=2.49), contained three items (4, 5, 6). The three items were added and divided by three to form a composite measure of "*perceived positive effects on self*" ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ). The second factor included three items (1, 2, 3) (*Eigenvalue*= 2.08; 34.69% of variance). The three items were added and divided by three to build a measure of "*perceived negative effects on self*" ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Perceived effects on others.* The measurement of perceived effects of news about election polls on others consisted of the same six items reworded to refer to others by replacing "you" with "others." The scale was the same. Principal component factor analysis showed that the six items were also grouped in two factors. The two-factor solution explained 83.07% of the total variance. The first factor, which accounted for 43.92% of the variance (*Eigenvalue*=2.64), consisted of three items (4, 5, 6). The three items were added and divided by three to form a composite measure of "*perceived positive effects on others*" ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ). The second factor included three items (1, 2, 3) (*Eigenvalue*= 2.35; 39.15% of variance). The three items were added and divided by three to build a measure of "*perceived negative effects on others*" ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Support for restrictions on news about election poll.* The measure consisted of four items. Respondents were asked how likely they would take the following actions if election polls caused a grave public concern: (1) signing a petition for fair media reports of election poll results, (2) boycotting news organizations that reported election polls with bias, (3) supporting legislative action to penalize news organizations that reported election polls unfairly, and (4) supporting legislative action to ban unfair reports of election poll. The response scale ranged from "1" (very unlikely) to "5" (very likely). These items were subjected to a principal component factor analysis. A single-factor solution emerged

(*Eigenvalue* = 3.03, explaining 75.71% of the variance). The items were combined into a composite measure of “support for restrictions on news about election polls” ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Campaign discourse engagement.* Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would (1) discuss results of presidential election poll with others, (2) discuss the popularity of the presidential candidates with others, and (3) seek more information about the polls on a 5-point Likert scale (1 meant “strongly disagree” and 5 meant “strongly agree”). Results of exploratory factor analysis of the three items confirmed that they measured a single underlying concept. The one factor solution explained 77.65% of the variance (*Eigenvalues* = 2.33). A composite measure of “campaign discourse engagement” was constructed by adding the three items and dividing by three ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Results

H1 predicted that respondents would perceive the 2008 Taiwan presidential election polls as reported in news media to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. Results of paired t-tests shown in Table 1 supported it. As expected, respondents perceived others as being more susceptible to the influence of news about election polls than themselves [ $t(1,095) = 28.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

H2 predicted that the third-person perceptual gap would be smaller if the respondents viewed news about election polls to be beneficial to voters. On the other hand, the perceptual gap would be greater if they viewed such news as harmful to voters. Results of a paired t-test indicate that the self-other perceptual gap in perceived negative effects of poll news ( $M = .57$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) was greater than the gap in perceived positive effects of such news ( $M = .37$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). The difference was statistically significant [ $t(1,087) = 5.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. These results show that respondents believed they were less influenced by election polls news, even such

news was presumed to have positive effects. H2 was supported.

H3a predicted that exposure to news about election polls would be significantly related to perceived effects of such news on self and others. To test it, four separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed to take the influence of demographics and media use into account with perceived negative as well as positive effects on self and others respectively as the dependent variables. As Table 2 shows, with the influence of demographics and media use being controlled, exposure to reports of election poll was not a significant predictor of perceived effects, negative or positive, of such reports on self or others. H3a was rejected.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

H3b predicted that attention to reports of election poll would be significantly related to perceived effects of such reports on self and others. Similar to earlier run, four separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test it. As Table 2 shows, with the influence of demographics, general media use, and exposure to election poll news being controlled, attention to reports of election poll was a significant and positive predictor of perceived positive effects of such reports on self ( $B = .19, p < .001$ ) and on others ( $B = .14, p < .001$ ). But attention to news about election polls was not significantly related to perceived negative effects on self and on others. H3b was partially supported.

H4 predicted that perceived credibility of election polls would be significantly related to the third-person perception. To test it, four separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed to take the influence of demographics and media use into account with perceived negative as well as positive effects on self and others respectively as the dependent variables. As Table 3 shows (the first and second column), with the influence of demographics, media use, and election polls exposure and attention being controlled, perceived credibility of election polls was the strongest predictor of perceived negative effects on self ( $B = -.13, p < .001$ ) and on others ( $B = -.17, p < .001$ ). These results suggest that the less credible election

polls were perceived, the greater the perceived negative effects they had on self and others.

On the other hand, perceived credibility of election polls was a significant and positive predictor of perceived positive effects on self ( $B = .07, p < .05$ ). This result indicates that the more credible election polls were perceived, the greater the positive effects they had on self. But perceived credibility was not significantly related to perceived positive effects on others ( $B = .07, p > .05$ ). H4 was basically supported. These results show that the lower credibility, the more harmful effects news about polls was believed to have on self and others. Thus, news about election polls is similar to media messages that are controversial such as like DTC ads (Huh et al., 2004) and news coverage of O.J Simpson (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997).

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

H5 predicted that perceived negative effects of reports of election poll on self and others would be better predictors of support for restrictions of news of election polls than would perceived positive effects of such reports on self and others. To test it, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed treating support for restrictions of media coverage of election polls as the dependent variable. The first block of the equation entered demographic variables as control variables. The second block included general media use variables, followed by exposure to news about election polls and attention to such news. The final block entered perceived negative and positive effects of reports of election poll on self and others.

As shown in Table 4 (columns 1), perceived negative effects on others ( $B = .19, p < .001$ ) was the strongest significant predictor of support for restrictions of reports of election poll, while perceived positive effects on self ( $B = .05, p > .05$ ) and others ( $B = .6, p > .05$ ) were not significant predictors. These results suggest that the more harmful news about election polls was believed to have on others, the stronger the respondents' desire to take action to restrict them. However, if the respondents viewed reports of election poll as having positive effects on voters, they would not support any restriction. H5 was supported.



[Insert Table 4 about here.]

H6 predicted that perceived positive effects of reports of election poll on self and others would be better predictors of campaign discourse engaging behavior than would perceived negative effects on self and others. To test it, another hierarchical regression analysis was performed. The first block of the equation entered demographics control variables. The second block included general media use variables, followed by exposure and attention to news reports of election poll. The final block entered perceived negative and positive effects of news about election polls on self and others.

As shown in Table 4 (columns 2), perceived negative effects of election poll news on self and others were not significant predictors of campaign discourse engagement, but perceived positive effects on self was a significant predictor ( $B = .15, p < .001$ ). That is, the more respondents believed reports of election poll would benefit them, the stronger their intention to seek more information about the polls and discuss them with others. Perceived positive effects of news about election polls on others did not show any predictive power over campaign discourse engagement. H6 was basically supported.

### Discussion

This study seeks to examine the third-person effects of news about election polls as a type of media message that has ambiguous influence on audience. In the context of media coverage of election polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race, both perceived negative and positive effects of such coverage were assessed. Results show that although news about election polls was perceived to be beneficial to voters, nevertheless respondents perceived others to be more influenced by the news than themselves. That is, a self-biased perceptual gap exists regardless the effects of election poll-based news are believed to be positive or negative. Thus, it seems that people view the impact of news about election polls as similar to controversial media messages, to which they are not willing to admit to be more influenced

by the news than others.

Furthermore, findings show that attention to election poll news, not exposure, enhanced the perceived positive effects of such news on self and others. The more attention respondents paid to news concerning election polls, the greater the positive effects they perceived such news to have on self and on others. This finding is not surprising. Previous research (Drew & Weaver, 2006; Wei & Lo, 2008) has demonstrated that media attention results in a greater learning effect from news than exposure. Broadly speaking, these findings suggest a process of media effect on audience: audience attention to media content leads to knowledge gain, which in turn moderates the self-other perceptual differential.

In addition, perceived poll credibility was found to be linked to perceived impact of news about election polls on self and others. The less credible election polls were thought, the stronger perceived effects on self and others. The pattern holds especially in the perceived negative effects of news about election polls.

Consistent with the literature, concern about others being negatively influenced by reports of election poll triggered protective behavioral tendency. More important, findings show that support for restrictions of media coverage of election polls was a function of perceived negative or positive effects of news about election polls. Perceived negative effects on others led to greater support. This particular finding compares well with similar findings in DTC drug ads in which consumers were found to be less supportive of restricting DTC drug ads when they viewed the ads as informative.

Interestingly, findings show that perceived positive effects of news about polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election on self resulted in discourse engagement. The more positive the perceived effects of news about election polls on self, the stronger the likelihood to engage in information-seeking and discussions of the poll. These results make theoretical sense. When respondents perceived reports of election poll to benefit them, they did not need

to defend the ego; driven by self-efficacy, they would seek more information about the polls and discuss the polls with others. As Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998) argued, in closely fought political campaigns, voters need more information to reinforce their political efficacy, which increases voting intentions. O’Cass and Pecotich (2005) made a similar argument. To reinforce their confidence and reduce risk of decision-making in a complex electoral process, voters will seek information to increase their knowledge about the election.

Sun et al. (2008) argue that the self-other perceptual gap will result in specific audience rectifying behaviors to restrict messages with negative influence, correct messages with ambiguous influence, or amplify messages with positive influence. Findings of this study focusing on election poll news as a kind of ambiguous media message demonstrate that perceived harms of media messages led to restricting tendency, but perceived positive effects motivated civic participation in a presidential election. These seemingly generalizable findings contribute to the robust third-person effect research.

It should be noted that the behavioral outcomes were measured as behavioral intentions, not actual behavior. This is a limitation of the present study.

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Table 1

Mean estimates of perceived effects of news reports of election polls on self and others

Samples	N	Self	Others	t-values
Negative effect	1,090	2.35 (1.06)	2.92 (1.11)	17.89 ***
Positive effect	1,091	2.37 (1.07)	2.74 (1.11)	12.03 ***
Others	1,095	1.63 (0.87)	2.65 (1.13)	28.02 ***

\*\*\*p<.001

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analyses predicting perceived negative and positive effects of news about election polls on self and on others

Independent variables	Perceived Negative Effects on		Perceived Positive Effects on	
	Self	Others	Self	Others
<b><u>Block 1: Demographics</u></b>				
Gender	-.04	.00	.01	.03
Age	-.03	.06	.02	.03
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00
<b><u>Block 2: Media Use</u></b>				
Newspaper use	.05	.04	.02	.04
TV use	-.01	-.05	.01	.00
Internet use	-.02	.00	.04	.01
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00
<b><u>Block 3: Polls Exposure &amp; Attention</u></b>				
Exposure	.06	.07	.07	-.02
Attention	-.08	-.02	.22***	.16***
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.07	.02
<b>Total adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.00	.03	.07	.02

Notes: Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. N = 1,023. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1=male, 0=female); election polls exposure (1= never, 4 = frequently); election polls attention (1 = not attentive at all; 5 = very attentive); perceived effect on self and others (1 = not at all, 5 = a strong influence).

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05.



Table 3

Hierarchical regression analyses predicting perceived negative and positive effects of news of election polls on self and on others

Independent variables	Perceived Negative Effects on		Perceived Positive Effects on	
	Self	Others	Self	Others
<b><u>Block 1: Demographics</u></b>				
Gender	-.03	.01	.01	.04
Age	-.04	.05	.02	.03
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00
<b><u>Block 2: Media Use</u></b>				
Newspaper use	-.03	.02	-.02	.03
TV use	.01	-.05	-.02	-.01
Internet use	.03	.05	-.00	.03
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00
<b><u>Block 3: Polls Exposure &amp; Attention</u></b>				
Exposure	.07	.06	.08	-.03
Attention	-.03	.07	.19***	.14**
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.01	.07	.02
<b><u>Block 4: Perceived credibility</u></b>				
Perceived credibility	-.13***	-.17***	.07*	.07
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.02	.00	.00
<b>Total adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.12	.03	.07	.02

Notes: Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. N = 1,023. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1=male, 0=female); election polls exposure (1= never, 4 = frequently); election polls attention (1 = not attentive at all; 5 = very attentive); perceived effect on self and others (1 = not at all, 5 = a strong influence).

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05.

Table 4

Hierarchical regression analyses predicting support for restrictions on news about election polls and campaign discourse engagement

Independent variables	Support for Restrictions	Campaign Discourse Engagement
<u>Block 1: Demographics</u>		
Gender (male)	.11***	-.03
Age	-.02	.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.00
<u>Block 2: Media Exposure</u>		
Newspaper use	-.01	.04
Television use	.01	.04
Internet use	.00	-.02
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.02
<u>Block 3: Polls Exposure and Attention</u>		
Exposure	.03	.21***
Attention	.20***	.21***
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.17
<u>Block 4: Perceived Effects</u>		
Perceived negative effect on self	.03	-.04
Perceived positive effect on self	.05	.15***
Perceived negative effect on others	.19***	-.05
Perceived positive effect on others	.06	.06
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.02
Total adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.14	.22

Notes: Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. N=1,064. Variables recoded as follows: gender (1=male, 0=female); election polls exposure (1= never, 4 = frequently); election polls attention (1 = not attentive at all; 5 = very attentive); perceived effect on self and others (1 = not at all, 5 = a strong influence); support for restriction of news reports of election polls (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely); Campaign discourse engagement (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

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