Who is driving whom

The media, voters and the bandwagon

Stolwijk, S.B.

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Opinion polls of vote intentions play a prominent role in today’s political campaigns. When positive opinion poll results trigger additional support for a party, this is denoted as a “bandwagon effect”. This dissertation has added a communication science perspective to the study of the bandwagon effect, by evaluating how poll ratings influence party coverage, and how exposure to poll coverage across a campaign influences a voter’s campaign interest, emotions about parties, turnout and vote choice. These questions have been investigated using panel surveys in combination with content analyses of media coverage and poll data relating to the German 2013 general (Bundestag) election campaign and the Dutch 2014 election campaign to the European Parliament. Results show that:

1. Party coverage of a front runner party increases with a decrease in its poll ratings.
2. Exposure to poll coverage increases campaign interest and turnout.
3. Exposure to more favorable poll coverage about a party increases the odds of voting for this party, partly because of the increase in enthusiasm and decrease in anxiety felt about this party.

The effect of polls on election outcomes is found to be a participatory act, resulting from the influence of various actors including pollsters, journalists, and voters themselves. Polls do incite emotions, which in turn influence attitudes towards parties. However, this is more likely an indication that voters are actively responding to campaign information, rather than that they are mindlessly following their herd instinct.
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Sjoerd B. Stolwijk
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Amsterdam School of Communication Research / ASCOR
Department of Communication, University of Amsterdam
Nieuwe Achtergracht 166
1018 WV Amsterdam
The Netherlands
sjoerdstolwijk@gmail.com
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Promotiecommissie:

Promotor: Prof. dr. C.H. de Vreese Universiteit van Amsterdam
Copromotor: Dr. A.R.T. Schuck Universiteit van Amsterdam

Overige leden:
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