

Examining the Perceptual Gap and Behavioral Intention in the Perceived Effects of Polling News in the 2008 Taiwan Presidential Election

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of polling news in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election from a third-person effect perspective. Results of a survey using a random sample of 1,097 respondents indicate that they perceived news about election polls to have a greater effect on others than themselves, regardless of whether the effects were perceived as negative or positive. Furthermore, findings show that attention to election polling news enhanced the perceived positive effects on self and others. Findings also point to a link between poll credibility and perceived effects on self and others. The less credible elections polls are perceived, the larger is the self–other perceptual gap. Finally, concern about the negative effects of election polling news on others is found to motivate respondents to consider protective behavior. However, findings show that perceived positive effects of such news on self resulted in intention to engage in campaign discourse. Theoretical implications of the findings to advance the third-person effect research are discussed.

Keywords

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

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Purposes of the Study

Polls have played an important role in American elections for more than 200 years (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, as they seek to be more accurate than their competitors in predicting the 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 (Pan, Abisaid, Paek, Sun, & Houden, 2005).

However, past studies showed that poll-generated stories have tended to be on the basis of faulty methodologies and were wrong in their predictions (Paterson, 2005; Rhee, 1996). The public tends to evaluate polls skeptically (Traugott, 2003). Price and Stroud (2005) reported that voters held a belief that pollsters and news media are biased because pollsters are viewed to attempt to influence election outcomes. This negative perception is particularly pronounced when the candidate opposed by the voters appears to be leading in the polls. The more partisan voters are or the stronger their group identification with the candidate, the stronger the perception of bias. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) theorized this phenomenon as the *hostile media effect*. Rosenstiel (2005) suggested that audience skepticism led to an environment of distrust about the methodology and integrity of polling. It is noteworthy that presidential election polls are more likely to be fraught with inaccuracies due to the financial constraints of polling agencies and the fast pace of the presidential primaries (Hagstrom, 1992). This has been the case in Taiwan. In the 2004 presidential election, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party candidate Chen Shui-bian trailed the Nationalist Party challenger Lien Chan by double digits in polls in the last week before 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 the 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 concerning 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 effect will be assessed. Finally, this study will explore whether greater perceived negative effects lead to stronger intention to support for restrictions on reports about election polls. It will also examine whether the perceived positive effects of such reports will result in likelihood to engage in civic discourse. Applying the third-person-effect framework to examine media effects in a Taiwan presidential election is based on three considerations: (1) Taiwan is an America-inspired democracy with a two-major-party political system; (2) election polls were conducted in every major election over the past

20 years in Taiwan, a country that enjoys a free press; and (3) the third-person effect in Taiwan was found to be robust in past research.

Message characteristics, or the social desirability of the underlying media message, lie at the heart of the third-person-effect theory (Eveland & McLeod, 1999). Past third-person-effect research paid a great deal of attention to negative messages, such as violence and pornography. The third-person perception has been found persistent (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1999). Past research also reported that the third-person perception found in negative messages is reversed in prosocial, positive messages, such as public service ads (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), although the reverse third-person perception was found less robust (David, Liu, & Myser, 2004). However, few studies have investigated the presumed impact of media messages that are not outright negative or positive, such as news reports about election polls. Polls play a major role in the election process, but the public is skeptical about them and poll-generated news reports (Lavrakas, Holley, & Miller, 1991). Under such circumstances, individuals will likely differentiate between positive and negative effects of polling news. Therefore, this study seeks to expand the third-person-effect research by applying the theory to examine a type of media message that provides useful information to voters while also potentially harming them. Because this type of messages set them apart from clearly positive or negative messages, findings will shed light on a new context in which the self-other perceptual disparity occurs.

Furthermore, by focusing on intention to support for restrictions and engage in campaign discourse as two distinct behavioral aspects of the self-other perceptions, this study will explore a dynamic process of how negative and positive perceptions of the impact of media messages lead to different behavioral tendencies. These findings will contribute to research on the behavioral component of the third-person hypothesis.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The Third-Person Perceptual Gap

In assessing effects of media messages on oneself relative to others, there is an enduring and fascinating phenomenon. As Davison (1983) put it, "People will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others" (p. 3). The phenomenon has been theorized as the third-person effect, which includes a self-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 (Paul et al., 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1999). 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, 1997), controversial advertising (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Huh, DeLorme, & Reid, 2004; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998; Youn, Faber, & 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) stated, 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, a reverse third-person effect (also known as the first-person effect) was found (Gunther & Thorson, 1992).

In a recent third-person-effect study of opinion polls, a self–other perceptual gap was found in perceived effects of media reports of general opinion polls, although such polls were scientifically generated data (Pan et al., 2005). Thus, in the context of news reports about election polls, which are more politically contentious than general opinion polls, public perceptions of the impact of such reports on self vis-à-vis others will differ.

Hypothesis 1: 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 increased attention to applying the third-person hypothesis to examining the perceived impact of mixed media messages. That is, media messages that are ambiguous because they contain both informational benefits and risks, such as news about avian flu, which were both informative and distressing. Wei, Lo, and Lu (2008) found that the more respondents read or watched avian flu news, the stronger the impact they perceived such news to have on self and others, reducing the self–other perceptual gap. The size of the third-person perception was found to be larger for antisocial than for prosocial lyrics (Eveland & McLeod, 1999).

Studies on direct-to-consumer (DTC) drug ads (DeLorme, Huh, & Reid, 2006, 2007; Huh et al., 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 perceived 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, and viewed others as being more vulnerable to the negative effects of DTC drug advertising (Huh et al., 2004). Consistently, the self–other perceptual gap was smaller in positively perceived effects than in negatively perceived effect.

Past studies on media coverage of polls suggested that the public has ambivalent views. Poll-generated stories were found to be useful and informative, but they were thought to be harmful to elections (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Lavrakas et al., 1991). Because of the public's ambivalence toward the roles and influence of election polls in politics, some scholars argue that election polls harm rather than help voters by oversimplifying issues and misleading the public (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). Broh (1980) characterized poll reports conducted in presidential elections as horse-race journalism. More important, Price and Stroud (2005) found that voters held a belief that pollsters and news media are biased

because pollsters are viewed to attempt to influence election outcomes. This is the case in Taiwan where there is a strong partisan media system under which news organizations either support the ruling Democratic Progressive Party or the opposition Nationalist Party (Lo, Hou, Teng, & Lee, 2004; Lo, Neilan, & King, 1998). Voters may perceive polling news in a presidential election to have harmful effects on themselves and other voters when they fear that polls and election projections reported in the partisan news media might mislead the voters and lend support to candidates opposed by themselves. Therefore, it is expected that the people will likely differentiate the negative and positive effects of polling news and perceive the effects on themselves and others differently.

Hypothesis 2: The third-person perceptual gap will be significantly smaller if people view news about election polls as beneficial to themselves and other 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 themselves and other voters.

Third-Person Perception and Media Use

Why and how does the third-person perceptual gap occur? Comprehensive and all-encompassing 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 (McLeod et al., 1997), self-categorization (Reid, Byrne, Brundidge, Shoham, & Marlow, 2007), and uncertainty reduction (Pan et al., 2005). Past research has identified media use as a contingent variable, which enhances the third-person perception (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). Salwen (1998, p. 264) suggested that media use may “amplify” the third-person perceptual bias disparity because people learn from media use. The learning effect means that the more knowledge people have about the content, the more certain they are in assessing the impact of such content on self and others. If the media content is harmful, a greater self–other perceptual gap will occur; if the media message is positive, a greater perceived positive impact on self and others will take place.

Analytically, past research suggests examining perceived media effects on oneself and on others separately, not the self–other perceptual discrepancy. For example, Rucinski and Salmon (1990) reported media use as a significant predictor of perceived media effects on oneself and others. Television viewing was found to be positively related to perceived effects of political messages on oneself, whereas greater newspaper exposure was positively associated with greater perceived effects on others. In a cross-cultural study of audience beliefs about foreign-media effects (Willnat, He, Takeshita, & Lopez-Escobar, 2002), mediated U.S. violence was perceived to have a negative effect on oneself and on others among all respondents. Gunther and Storey (2003) argued in favor of using perceived influence on others as a broader approach to examining presumed media effects. Their study found that exposure to radio drama was positively related to presumed influence on others. Park (2005) also 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 plausible to test the linkage between exposure to polling news and perceived effects of such news on self and others separately in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election. Furthermore, considering polling news has both benefits and harms, it is hypothesized that greater exposure leads to a greater learning effect, which results in positive estimates of such news on self and on others in a high-stake election:

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to polling news will be significantly related to the perceived effects of such news on self and others. Specifically, exposure will be negatively related to the perceived harms on self and others, but will be positively related to the 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 television news was a significant predictor of knowledge about candidates in the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Sotirovic and McLeod (2004) found that attention to campaign news in newspapers and on national television significantly predicted knowledge in the 2000 presidential election. Drew and Weaver (2006) examined the relationships between exposure and attention to various news media and found that attention to television 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 pay to such news, the greater the positive effects of the news they will perceive on self and on others.

Hypothesis 4: Attention to news about election polls will be significantly related to the perceived effects of such news on self and others. Specifically, attention will be negatively related to the perceived harms on self and others but positively related to the perceived benefits on self and others.

Third-Person Perception and Media Credibility

Past research also identified media credibility as a contingent variable, which mitigates the self–other perceptual gap. The construct of credibility, a characteristic of information, a source or medium, 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; Kioussis, 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 the *National Enquirer*, which is noncredible when compared to the *New York Times*. People tended to perceive others as 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 much they believed 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.

Hypothesis 5: Credibility of election polls will be significantly related to the perceived effects of news about election polls on self and others. Specifically, the lower the credibility, the greater the perceived negative effects on self and others. On the other hand, the higher the credibility, the greater the perceived positive effects on self and others.

Third-Person Perceptual Gap and Behavioral Implications

The self–other perceptual gap has implications for behavior: People tend to act on their perceptions even though the perceptions are biased. As Gunther and Storey (2003) argued, people who assume influences of media messages on audiences 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, 2002; Hoffner et al., 1999; Lo & Paddon, 2001; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Wei & Lo, 2007; Youn et al., 2000).

Sun, Shen, and Pan (2008) argued that audience-specific rectifying behaviors due to the self–other perceptual gap will be aimed at restricting messages with a negative influence, correcting messages with an ambiguous influence, and amplifying messages with a positive influence. Studies on the perceived impact of news reports about polls showed the public favored restrictions on such polls in the media (Lavrakas et al., 1991). Furthermore,

de Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that the more voters were concerned about the influence of polls on the public in Denmark's 2000 euro referendum, the stronger was the support for restrictions on the publication of polls. Price and Stroud (2005) found that negative impression of polling was significantly and positively related to support for prohibiting election-night projections. Building on the rationale that people would perceive media coverage of polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election to have both negative and positive effects (Hypothesis 2) and that findings in past research (Huh et al., 2004) show that negatively perceived effects of DTC-drug ads were a significant predictor of support for DTC-ad regulation, it is theoretically important to explore whether greater perceived negative effects will lead to stronger intention to support for restrictions on news reports about election polls and whether greater perceived positive effects will lead to less likelihood of support for such restrictions.

Research Question 1: Perceived negative effects of news about election polls on self and others will be better predictors of intention to 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 beyond censorship to the likelihood of developing an eating disorder (David & Johnson, 1998), the intention to relocate if people believed that others were more affected by media coverage of their town than they were (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003), the likely interaction with health workers (Gunther & Storey, 2003), the increased desire to be slim (Park, 2005), and the 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 joint effect of first- and third-person perceptions was positively associated with respondents' behavioral intentions in civil participation such as discussions about elections and voting. Banning (2007) also explored the effect of third-person perception on voting. He hypothesized that people with a greater level of third-person perception would have a greater motivation to go out and vote. Results of survey data showed third-person perception as a significant predictor of past voting behavior in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. In an experiment to examine the behavioral responses of subjects to political ads, Golan, Banning, and Lundy (2008) also found that the third-person perception predicted the likelihood of voting. They argued that the overestimation of political advertising effects on others motivated individuals to go to the voting stations.

These findings further expanded the domain of behavioral implications of the self-other perceptual gap. However, they failed to differentiate between the perceived positive effects of media messages and the negative effects on political participation. To fill the gap, the perceived positive and negative impacts of media messages on behavioral intention are explored in this study. Specifically, in reacting to the positive and negative effects of reports about election polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race, it is expected that the perceived positive effect of polling news will likely be positively correlated with the intention to engage in civic activities. That is, the more that 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 about election polls 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.

Hypothesis 6: Perceived positive effects of news about election polls on self and others will be better predictors of campaign-discourse-engagement intention 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 10 randomly selected colleges from a pool of 147 colleges in Taiwan. Three classes were randomly chosen from each of the 10 colleges. With prior permission of instructors, self-administered questionnaires were distributed in the selected classes during a 2-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, 1,097 (95.8%) completed the survey.

Of the sample, 52.1% were men and 47.9% were women. Their average age was 20.3 years ($SD = 1.47$). The distribution of college years of study was roughly even. More than one fifth (21.3%) were freshmen, one third were sophomores (33.7%), one third were juniors (32.2%), and the rest were seniors (12.7%). The sample closely matched the gender ratio of the overall population of college students in Taiwan. The ratio between male and female students among colleges was 50.5% vs. 49.5%. A chi-square test shows that there was no difference between the sample and population, $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 1,097) = 1.17, p > .05$. Regarding age, there are no official statistics about the average age of college students. Given the large sample and the even distribution of years of study, the sample is representative of the college population in Taiwan.

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 television or on the Internet. A 4-point scale was used to indicate frequency, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Results of an exploratory factor analysis show a single-factor solution, indicating the 3 items measured the same underlying concept (Eigenvalue = 2.30%, accounting for 76.58% of the variance). A composite scale of exposure to news reports about election polls was built by averaging the 3 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

television or on the Internet. A 5-point scale was used here, with responses ranging from 1 (*no attention*) to 5 (*a lot of attention*). Results of an exploratory factor analysis show a single-factor solution, indicating the 3 items measured the same underlying concept (Eigenvalue = 2.53%, explains 84.21% of the variance). A composite scale of attention to news reports about election polls was built by averaging the 3 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 television, and on the Internet. The response categories ranged from 1 (*very untruthful*) to 5 (*very truthful*). Results of an exploratory factor analysis show that the 3 items grouped in a single factor (Eigenvalue = 2.56, accounting for 85.25% of the variance). The 3 items were added and divided by 3 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, 6 items were measured using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*no influence at all*) to 5 (*a great deal of influence*). The items were based on pretests. Specifically, respondents rated how much this news coverage affected them regarding the following questions: “How much do you think viewing news reports of 2008 presidential election poll has (1) misled your understanding of the election campaign? (2) reduced your desire to vote? (3) made you dislike the election campaign? (4) helped you understand candidates’ actual fit for presidential office? (5) helped you know candidates’ positions 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, which accounted for 76.17% of the total variance. The first factor, accounting for 41.48% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.49), contained Items 4, 5, and 6. The 3 items were added and divided by 3 to form a composite measure of perceived positive effects on self ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .89$). The second factor included Items 1, 2, and 3 (Eigenvalue = 2.08; accounting for 34.69% of variance). The 3 items were added and divided by 3 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 6 items reworded to refer to others by replacing “you” with “others.” The scale was the same. Principal-component-factor analysis show that the 6 items were also grouped in 2 factors. The 2-factor solution accounted for 83.07% of the total variance. The first factor, accounting for 43.92% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.64), consisted of Items 4, 5, and 6. The 3 items were added and divided by 3 to form a composite measure of perceived positive effects on others ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.10$, $\alpha = .93$). The second factor included Items 1, 2, and 3 (Eigenvalue = 2.35, accounting for 39.15% of variance). The 3 items were added and divided by 3 to build a measure of perceived negative effects on others ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.11$, $\alpha = .86$).

Intention to support for restrictions on news about election poll. The measure consisted of 4 items. Respondents were asked how likely they would be to 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 about election polls. 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, accounting for 75.71% of the variance). The items were combined into a composite measure of intention to support for restrictions on news about election polls ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.11$, $\alpha = .89$).

Intention to engage in campaign discourse. Respondents were asked to indicate, using a 5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), how likely they would (1) discuss the results of presidential election polls with others, (2) discuss the popularity of the presidential candidates with others, and (3) seek more information about the polls. Results of exploratory factor analysis of the 3 items confirmed that they measured a single underlying concept. The one-factor solution accounted for 77.65% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.33). A composite measure of intention to engage in campaign discourse was constructed by averaging the 3 items ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .98$, $\alpha = .86$).

Respondents' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and age) were collected and used as control variables in the regression analyses because previous studies indicated that they were related to third-person effects (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2002; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990) and support for the censorship of media content (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Wei, 2002; Rojas et al., 1996). In addition, respondents' general media exposure, including newspaper use, television use, and Internet use, were also measured and controlled in the regression analyses because past studies reported that they were related to third-person effects (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997; Rojas et al., 1996; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990).

Results

Hypothesis 1 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. The results of paired t tests shown in Table 1 support it. As expected, respondents perceived others as being more susceptible to the influence of polling news than themselves: $t(1,095) = 28.02$, $p < .001$. Hypothesis 2 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 significantly greater than the gap in perceived positive effects of such news, $M = .37$, $SD = 1.03$, $t(1,087) = 5.64$, $p < .001$; thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 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

Table 1. Mean Estimates of Perceived Effects of News Reports About Election Polls on Oneself and Others

Samples	N	Self	Others	t values
Negative effects	1,090	2.35 (1.06)	2.92 (1.11)	17.89*
Positive effects	1,091	2.37 (1.07)	2.74 (1.11)	12.03*

* $p < .001$.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Perceived Negative and Positive Effects of News About Election Polls on Oneself and on Others

Independent variables	Perceived negative effects		Perceived positive effects	
	Self	Others	Self	Others
Block 1: demographics				
Gender	-.04	.00	.01	.03
Age	-.03	.06	.02	.03
Adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 2: media use				
Newspaper use	.05	.04	.02	.04
Television use	-.01	-.05	.01	.00
Internet use	-.02	.00	.04	.01
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 3: polls exposure and attention				
Exposure	.06	.07	.07	-.02
Attention	-.08	-.02	.22*	.16*
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.07	.02
Total adjusted R ²	.00	.03	.07	.02

Notes: Beta weights are from a final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model; $n = 1,097$. Variables are coded as follows: gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*), election polls exposure (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*), election polls attention (1 = *no attention* to 5 = *a lot of attention*), and perceived effect on self and others (1 = *no influence at all* to 5 = *a great deal of influence*).

* $p < .001$.

demographics and media use being controlled, exposure to reports about election polls was not a significant predictor of perceived effects, either negative or positive, of such reports on self or others. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was rejected.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that attention to reports about election polls would be significantly related to perceived effects of such reports on self and others. 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 about election polls was a significant and positive predictor of

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Perceived Negative and Positive Effects of News About Election Polls on Oneself and on Others

Independent variables	Perceived negative effects		Perceived positive effects	
	Self	Others	Self	Others
Block 1: demographics				
Gender	-.03	.01	.01	.04
Age	-.04	.05	.02	.03
Adjusted R^2	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 2: media use				
Newspaper use	-.03	.02	-.02	.03
Television use	.01	-.05	-.02	-.01
Internet use	.03	.05	-.00	.03
Incremental adjusted R^2	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 3: polls exposure and attention				
Exposure	.07	.06	.08	-.03
Attention	-.03	.07	.19***	.14**
Incremental adjusted R^2	.00	.01	.07	.02
Block 4: perceived credibility				
Perceived poll credibility	-.13***	-.17***	.07*	.07
Incremental adjusted R^2	.12	.02	.00	.00
Total adjusted R^2	.12	.03	.07	.02

Notes: Beta weights are from a final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model; $n = 1,097$. Variables are coded as follows: gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*), exposure to election polls (1 = *never* to = *often*), attention paid to election polls (1 = *no attention* to 5 = *a lot of attention*), perceived effect on self and others (1 = *no influence at all* to 5 = *a great deal of influence*).

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

perceived positive effects of such reports on self ($B = .22$, $p < .001$) and on others ($B = .16$, $p < .001$). But attention to news about election polls was not significantly related to perceived negative effects on self and on others. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 5 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 were 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 ($B = .07, p > .05$). Hypothesis 5 was partially 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 DTC ads (Huh et al., 2004) and news coverage of O. J. Simpson (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997).

Research Question 1 explored that perceived negative effects of reports about election polls on self and others would be better predictors of intention to 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 intention to support for restrictions on media coverage of election polls as the dependent variable. The first block of the equation entered demographics 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 about election polls on oneself and others.

As shown in Table 4 (Column 1), perceived negative effects on others ($B = .19, p < .001$) were the strongest significant predictor of intention to support for restrictions on reports about election polls, whereas perceived positive effects on self ($B = .05, p > .05$) and others ($B = .06, p > .05$) were not significant predictors. These results suggest that the more harmful the polling news was believed to be for others, the stronger the respondents' motivation was to take action to restrict them. However, if the respondents viewed reports about election polls as having positive effects on voters, they would not intend to support any restriction.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that perceived positive effects of reports about election polls on self and others would be better predictors of intention to engage in campaign discourse than 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 about election polls. The final block entered perceived negative and positive effects of news about election polls on self and others. As shown in Table 4 (Column 2), perceived negative effects about election poll news on self and others were not significant predictors of likelihood of campaign discourse engagement, but perceived positive effects on self were a significant predictor ($B = .15, p < .001$). That is, the more respondents believed reports about election polls would benefit them, the stronger their intention was 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 intention to engage in campaign discourse. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was partially supported.

Discussion

A main tenet of the third-person-effect theory rests on message characteristics or social desirability of the underlying message (Eveland & McLeod, 1999). The perceived influence of negative media messages has been found to be more robust than the perceived

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
Block 1: demographics		
Gender (male)	.11*	-.03
Age	-.02	.01
Adjusted R ²	.01	.00
Block 2: media exposure		
Newspaper use	-.01	.04
Television use	.01	.04
Internet use	.00	-.02
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.02
Block 3: poll exposure and attention		
Exposure	.03	.21*
Attention	.20*	.21*
Incremental adjusted R ²	.06	.17
Block 4: perceived effects		
Perceived negative effects on oneself	.03	-.04
Perceived positive effects on oneself	.05	.15*
Perceived negative effects on others	.19*	-.05
Perceived positive effects on others	.06	.06
Incremental adjusted R ²	.06	.02
Total adjusted R ²	.14	.22

Notes: Beta weights are from a final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model; $n = 1,097$. Variables are coded as follows: gender (0 = male, 1 = female), exposure to election polls (1 = never to 4 = often), attention paid to election polls (1 = no attention to 5 = a lot of attention), perceived effect on self and others (1 = no influence at all to 5 = a great deal of influence), support for restrictions on news reports about election polls (1 = very unlikely to 5 = very likely), and campaign-discourse engagement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

* $p < .001$.

influence of positive messages (David et al., 2004). However, the third-person-effect theory is unclear regarding the perceived effects of media messages that have an ambiguous quality. Therefore, the goal of this study is to test the third-person effect in the context of ambiguous messages by focusing on polling news as a type of media message that can be viewed as beneficial, harmful, or neither. Using media coverage of election polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential race as the context, 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, respondents perceived others to be more influenced by the news than themselves. A self-biased perceptual gap exists regardless of whether the election poll-based news is believed to have positive or negative effects.

This finding is consistent with Pan et al.'s (2005) study, which found that "public perceptions of news stories on opinion polls reporting presumably 'scientific' data did not get

translated into the public's unbiased perceptions of the effects of media poll reports" (p. 347). It appears people tend to view polling news, a sort of ambiguous message with positive and negative effects or neither, as similar to negative or persuasive messages. Therefore, when asked to assess the effects of such messages on themselves relative to others, regardless of their positive or negative effects, respondents believed others were more influenced by polling news than themselves, although the results indicate that the perceptual difference was smaller when the effects were considered positive rather than negative. The implication of this particular finding is that respondents viewed admitting being influenced by news reports about election polls as socially undesirable. Our finding then extends the third-person-effect research from the level of message characteristics (or what Eveland & McLeod, 1999, called the "social desirability of the message") to message attributes. It contributes to the literature by showing that message characteristics, such as ambiguous messages like polling news, triggers the self-other perceptual disparity regardless of whether the effects of such messages are viewed as positive or negative. In other words, message characteristics (prosocial, negative, or ambiguous) outweigh message attributes (perceived positive, negative, or neutral effects).

Ego-enhancement and individuals' egocentric reasoning (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Pan et al., 2005) may explain people's reluctance to admit being influenced by election polls in the news media. As election polls may affect the outcome, people are unwilling to admit being influenced by polling news more than others, specifically to avoid being seen as joining the bandwagon of leading candidates (bandwagon effect) and as in agreement with the rest of the electorate (the false-consensus effect). On the other hand, they believe others as more easily persuaded by election polling news than themselves because others represent pluralistic ignorance or are simply naive. These two separate processes of reasoning merit further research, which can test each of these plausible explanations to seek a better understanding of why and how the third-person perceptual bias occurs in the context of polling news.

Viewing others as being more likely to be persuaded by election polling news than oneself leads to different behavioral intention, which is another major finding of this study. Concern about others being negatively influenced by reports about election polls triggered protective behavioral tendencies. The more others are believed to be influenced by polling news (no matter whether the effects of the news are perceived as positive or negative), the greater is the support for restrictions on media coverage of election polls. This finding is consistent with the literature, which suggests when people define others as being more influenced by undesirable media content as a problem, they tend to support censorship to address the problem, which is a type of rectifying behavior (Sun et al., 2008).

However, perceived positive effects of news about polls in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election on oneself resulted in political discourse engagement. The more positive the perceived effects of polling news were on oneself, the more likely respondents would engage in information seeking and discussions of the polls. It appears when respondents perceived reports about election polls as beneficial to them, they did not need to defend their ego. Rather, they would seek more information about the polls and discuss them with others. Perceived positive effects motivated civic participation in a presidential election.

These two different behavioral tendencies as consequences of the third-person perception hold promise for further study.

Effectance motivation, which refers to an individual's intrinsic need to deal effectively with or control the environment (Jones, 1979), offers an explanation for taking politically engaging actions due to the perceived positive impact of polling news. As Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998) argued, in highly competitive political campaigns, voters need more information to reinforce their political efficacy, which increases voting intentions. According to O'Cass and Pecotich (2005), voters will seek information to increase their knowledge about the election in order to reinforce their confidence and reduce the risk of decision making in a complex electoral process. Polling news has informational benefits. Although this study did not test *effectance motivation* as a mechanism to account for the behavioral intention, it is a direction that further research can explore.

Finally, to compare the predictive power of perceived negative effects and perceived positive effects on oneself versus others in predicting behavioral intention, the self–other perceptual differential was not used in predicting support for restrictions of polling news and engagement in campaign discourse in this study. This approach is consistent with recent studies (e.g., Gunther & Storey, 2003) that attempt to overcome the inconsistent findings about whether it is the perceived effect on oneself, on others, or the third-person perception that accounts for the relationship between perception and support for censorship (Schmierbach, Boyle, & McLeod, 2008). Building on this study, future research may attempt various analytical approaches to explore the relationships among perceived negative effects on oneself versus others, perceived positive effects on oneself versus others, the third-person perception, and behavioral intention. As Schmierbach et al. suggested, scholars should assess multiple models because “using only one analytical model does not tell the complete story” (p. 493).

This study has several other limitations. The generalization of its findings may be limited due to the use of a fairly restricted and relatively homogeneous population of college students. Such a sample does not represent the general voting population. Therefore, future research should replicate this study with a sample representative of a more heterogeneous general population. Also, variances in the third-person perception explained by the tested models were small. A low R^2 value may result from a lack of other predictor variables or random variation. Thus, a full model is needed in future research, incorporating variables such as interest in elections and media orientations.

Another limitation of this study is that the behavioral measures were behavioral intentions, not actual behaviors. Moreover, the index of support for restricting election-poll reporting used questions with a specified negative influence. Such questions may enhance or reduce the relationship found between the perceived negative effect on others and support for restrictions, which was the concern of Research Question 1. Hence, it is important that this key caveat be considered when interpreting the findings. Last, but not the least, because of the one-shot survey data that were used, the significant relationships reported are correlational in nature, not causal. For example, regarding the linkage between perceived effects on oneself versus others and campaign-discourse engagement, it is plausible that discourse engagement leads to positive perceptions of poll-generated news. Though

this is a problem in similar studies, it is highly desirable to ascertain whether perceived positive effects of polls induce discussions about them or whether discussions of polls shape positive perceptions of polls using longitudinal or experimental data in future research.

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