

Televised Political Learning: Influence of Prime-Time Televised Political News and Debates on the Political Awareness of the Viewers of Malayalam TV News Channels

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ABSTRACT: *Despite the emergence of a series of news channels in India in the past few decades, the influence of news shows on public opinion has hardly been studied in the country. Given the size, reach and popularity they enjoy in Malayalam, news channels in Kerala can match any of their counterparts in the advanced world. Yet, few researches have been done to map their influence on the masses. Using data from a before-and-after panel survey conducted during the 2011 Kerala Assembly polls campaign, primarily aimed to assess the influence of election news and debates on the voting behaviour of viewers of Malayalam TV news channels, this study examines how prime-time televised political news and debates influence political awareness of viewers of Malayalam TV news channels during an election campaign. Analysing the responses of 512 voters in Kerala (N = 512), gathered through the first-wave pre-campaign survey, the study shows high viewership of political news and debates helps enhance viewers' political awareness. The study has found that sampled respondents as a whole had an appreciably high mean score of little more than 15. Further, it suggests that all socio demographic variables except economic status had a significant bearing on the viewers' political awareness. While high levels of political awareness was more salient among male, the upper-aged, highly educated, and employees in government and private sectors, it was low among females, homemakers and students.*

KEYWORDS: *Election Campaigns, Political Awareness, Political Learning, Political News and Debates, Televised Political Learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

For most citizens across the world, television news coverage of politics and election campaigns is the most important and readily available source of information (Gulati, Just & Crigler 2004; De Vreese, 2008). Exposure to information sources such as television has an impact on the cognitive (awareness, knowledge, images of politics, etc.), affective (interest, attitudes toward political leaders, issues and attachment to the political system, etc.), behavioural (interpersonal discussion, political participation etc.) aspects and, of course, on voting decisions of the audience (Atkin, 1981).

I.1. Early Studies

Several scholars have studied the influence of television on political learning at various historical junctures and found that television has been the most important source of political awareness (Robinson cited in Kraus and Davis, 1976; Prisuta 1973; Swanson (1973); Chaffee and Schleuder, 1986; Becker and Dunwoody, 1982; Chaffee et al, 1994; Sue 1994). That television contributes to political learning during elections has also been detected in several other studies (Zhao and Chaffee 1995; Weaver and Drew, 1995; Leshner and McKean 1997; Norris 2000). They all concluded that exposure to television news was significantly associated with respondents' political knowledge

Recently, Papathanassopoulos (2000) in his paper "Election Campaigning in the Television Age: The Case of Contemporary Greece" has brought out the centrality of television in contemporary Greek poll campaigns and politics. In other countries too, television remains to be the medium that provides election news and information for the public. In the words of Stromback and Kaid (2008) who have edited a comprehensive volume on media coverage of elections around the world, "in almost all countries, television is the most dominant medium, although more so in some countries than others. In Sweden, for example, newspapers remain very important, whereas in the United States, television is significantly more important than newspapers particularly with respect to the influence over public opinion (p. 421-422)."

Most of such reviews, sparing a few, broadly signal the importance of television in political learning during election campaigns. Against this backdrop, the present study was conceived to assess the influence of prime-time televised political news and debates on the political awareness of the viewers of Malayalam TV news channels during an election campaign and to examine whether such awareness was extant among the groups of the five socio-demographic variables.

I.2. Prime Time News and Debate Shows of Malayalam News Channels

Thanks to their sheer size and reach, news channels have the potential to shaping and even manufacturing public opinion in the country. A reflection of their importance can be gauged from the popularity of the top-notch Indian news anchors such as Barkha Dutt of *NDTV*, Arnab Goswami of *Times Now* and M.V. Nikesh Kumar of Malayalam news channel, *Reporter*. While some news anchors are as popular as matinee idols, news channels often command the power to use this popularity to shape the content of print media as well. It's a curious case of cannibalism. No wonder then that politicians today make it a point to appear on television and be seen debating key issues. Television news shows are one of the most prominent sources of information for people, who watch news shows to keep abreast of day-to-day developments in politics and other spheres. Among the shows, prime time news shows which are telecast between 9.00 pm – 10.00 pm, sum up important news events of the day. They also debate one or two of the important issues of the day. This format is followed across the spectrum, including most regional language news channels, which follow the presentation and news packaging style evolved and perfected by English news channels such as *NDTV*, *CNN-IBN*, *Times Now*, *Headlines Today* etc. This is also the case with the four Malayalam news channels - *Asianet News*, *Indiavision*, *People*, and *Manorama News* - whose news and debate shows namely; *Asianet News*' News Hour, *Indiavision*'s News Night, *People*'s News N Views and *Manorama News*' Counter Point/Prime time news are at the centre of this study. These were the only news channels in Kerala during 2011 Kerala Assembly Polls.

I.2.1. Format of News and Debate Shows in Malayalam News Channels

The news and debate shows run for an hour including breaks for commercials. Each show begins with the news presenter reading out the headlines of important news stories which are displayed on the screen simultaneously. Then the presenter picks the issue at debate and introduces the panel. Usually, such panels have 2-5 experts excluding the presenter. As moderator, the presenter poses questions at each of the panellists and provides them with a certain amount of time to respond. In cases where the discussants are not able to be present at the studio, they are linked to the newsroom over phone and insets of their photographs are displayed along with their names and designations. This, obviously, is a practice followed globally by most of the news channels. Like elsewhere on the globe, news channels in Kerala too compete with each other to rope in experts for debate. Usually, a political issue will be discussed by a panel including representatives from the LDF, UDF and the right-wing BJP. Often, such a cast would also include a media person or a political scientist who will give the debate an objective or neutral tilt. At times, some channels record debate shows and telecast them during prime time. The debates, obviously, witness heated arguments and most panellists complain of lack of time for discussion. After ensuring that all sides of the issue are covered, the presenter concludes the debate and goes for a commercial break. After the break, the presenter reads out other important news stories of the day and ends the show.

II. DATA AND MEASURES

The present study uses data from a before-and-after panel survey conducted during the 2011 Kerala Assembly polls campaign primarily aimed to assess the influence of election news and debates on the voting behaviour of the viewers of Malayalam TV news channels. Individuals to be included in the sample for this study were required to meet the criteria of being a registered voter in Kerala and viewers of at least one of the Malayalam news channels' prime-time news and debate shows such as *Asianet News*' News Hour., *Indiavision*'s News Night., *People*'s News N Views and *Manorama News*' Counter Point and Prime-Time News. Though the data was collected through a two-wave panel survey, that is, in the beginning (March 19 and 20) and at the end (April 11 and 12) of 2011 Kerala Assembly poll campaign, only the pre-campaign survey that assessed the political awareness of the respondents was utilized for this article.

II.1. Sample Selection

It was decided to draw a purposive sample through a multi-stage process. First, we divided the state of Kerala into three zones, North, Central and South. From each zone, one Assembly constituency was purposively selected based on its voting preferences. To represent the North zone, Thalassery constituency was chosen. Representing the Central zone was the Puthuppally constituency, while Chathannoor was selected to represent the south zone.

From each constituency, one panchayat was selected, and from each panchayat, three wards were chosen. From each of these wards, a sample of 60 voters was drawn. At this stage, trained investigators went

round the selected wards, identified and selected one member from each household for inclusion in the sample. Here, care was taken to include individuals belonging to various socio-economic categories. Data was collected by 18 trained investigators simultaneously in all wards using structured questionnaire. The respondents were met at the home or work places and were presented with the questionnaire in Malayalam after reaffirming that they are registered voters and watch news and debate shows telecast by Malayalam channels mentioned above. With the exclusion of incomplete and defective questionnaires, the effective sample size got reduced to 512. Their responses were coded and analysed using SPSS version 17.

II.2. Political Awareness Measure

Political awareness is a measure of reception and ‘cognizing’ of the messages generally received by the public from mass media (Zaller, 1992). As an indicator of electorates’ interest in politics, it would have some bearing on their political behaviour in general and voting behaviour in particular. While some past studies have measured awareness by assessing the biographical knowledge about candidates such as their professional and political accomplishments, some other studies have assessed the position of political parties and candidates on policies and issues (Chaffee et al, 1994). In this study political awareness is measured through 20 true or false statements pertaining to political parties, candidates and political issues debated by the news and debate shows of four Malayalam news channels during the run up to Kerala Assembly polls 2011.

III. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Before directly examining the political awareness of the respondents, their regularity of viewing television news and debates and the viewership of such news and debate shows have to be examined. Because, several of the studies mentioned above have established the symbiotic relationship between television exposure and political learning. In similar line, this study also has an underlying assumption that if television news and debates were to influence the political awareness of its viewers, they must first indicate high exposure to such shows.

III.1. Regularity of Viewing Prime Time TV News and Debate Shows

The regularity of viewing TV news and debate shows was ascertained based on the number of days the viewers watched it in a normal week. The eight response choices ranged from seven days a week to less than once a week. Based on their responses, the respondents were classified under three categories: regular viewers (5 - 7 days a week); frequent viewers (3 - 4 days a week); and occasional viewers (one - two days a week, or less). Such a classification reported in Table 1 revealed that a little over 91 percent of the respondents were regular viewers. A bare 3.9 percent and 4.9 percent of the sample watched TV frequently and occasionally respectively.

TABLE 1: Regularity of Viewing Prime Time TV News and Debate Shows

Regularity of Viewing	N	%
Regular viewers	467	91.2
Frequent viewers	20	3.9
Occasional viewers	25	4.9
Total	512	100.0

Source: Survey data

Regularity of Viewing Prime Time TV News and Debates and Socio-demographic Variables

Is the nature of regularity of viewing TV news and debate shows similar among the various socio-demographic groups under the variables of gender, age, education, occupation and income? To seek an answer to this question, the regularity of viewing was cross-tabulated with each of the five demographic variables and chi square analysis was carried out to detect significant differences. The results reported in Table 2 clearly show that none of the socio demographic variables had any bearing on the regularity of viewing TV news and debate shows. For instance, the proportion of regular viewers between the two genders was nearly equal. Among the frequent viewers, male had a higher proportion (5.8 percent) than their female counterparts (3.5 percent). Among the occasional viewers, female had a slightly higher share (5 percent) than male viewers (3.2 percent). Such differences, however, were not statistically significant as was borne out by chi square test. Likewise, the nature of regularity of viewing TV news and debate shows was not dependent upon the variables of age, education, occupation and income. In other words, the viewing regularity was similar across gender, age, education, occupation and income groups.

Thus, it can be deduced that regularity of viewing TV news and debates was independent of socio demographic variables with an overwhelming majority being regular viewers as against a small minority who were frequent and occasional viewers.

TABLE 2: Regularity of Viewing Prime Time Television News and Debates by Socio-demographic Variables

Variables and Groups	Regular Viewers		Frequent Viewers		Occasional Viewers		Total		Chi Square Results
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Gender									
• Male	284	91.0	18	5.8	10	3.2	312	100.0	X ² = 2.293 df= 2 Sig = .318
• Female	183	91.5	7	3.5	10	5.0	200	100.0	
Total	467	91.2	25	4.9	20	3.9	512	100.0	
Age (in years)									
• 18 -53	185	88.9	13	6.3	10	4.8	208	100.0	X ² = 6.011 df= 4 Sig = .198
• 36 - 50	148	90.2	10	6.1	6	3.7	164	100.0	
• > 51	134	95.7	2	1.4	4	2.9	140	100.0	
Total	467	91.2	25	4.9	20	3.9	512	100.0	
Education									
• SSLC and <	174	91.6	6	3.2	10	5.2	190	100.0	X ² = 6.346 df=6 Sig = .386
• PDC/+2	119	92.2	5	3.9	5	3.9	129	100.0	
• Graduate	121	89.6	11	8.1	3	2.2	135	100.0	
• PG and above	53	91.4	3	5.2	2	3.4	58	100.0	
Total	467	91.2	25	4.9	20	3.9	512	100.0	
Occupation									
• Unemployed	37	90.2	2	4.9	2	4.9	41	100.0	X ² =7.560 df=8 Sig = .478
• Homemaker	86	91.5	2	2.1	6	6.4	94	100.0	
• Student	50	89.3	5	8.9	1	1.8	56	100.0	
• Self employed	149	92.0	6	3.7	7	4.3	162	100.0	
• Govt./private Service	145	91.2	10	6.3	4	2.5	159	100.0	
Total	467	91.2	25	4.9	20	3.9	512	100.0	
Monthly income									
• < Rs 15000	189	89.2	12	5.7	11	5.2	212	100.0	X ² = 7.431 df=4 Sig = .115
• Rs.15001-35000	203	94.4	9	4.2	3	1.4	215	100.0	
• > Rs 35000	75	88.2	4	4.7	6	7.1	85	100.0	
Total	467	91.2	25	4.9	20	3.9	512	100.0	

Source: computed from the variables specified

III.2. Viewership of Prime-Time TV News and Debate Shows

To realize the objective of this study, that is, to assess the influence of prime-time televised political news and debates on the political awareness of the viewers of Malayalam TV news channels during election campaign period, the viewership of four Malayalam news channels' news and debate shows was determined. A widespread viewership would contribute to the validity of viewer's political awareness level and their credibility perception as well (Muneer V., & Ahmed S.A, 2014).

The viewership analysis results reported in Table 3 show that *Asianet News'* News Hour had the highest viewership. It was being watched by 77 percent of the respondents of the study. The second most popular news and debate show was Counter Point debate show/Prime Time news of *Manorama News* channel. It was being

watched by 66 percent of the respondents. *India vision's* News Night telecast daily was the third most watched show. The least viewership (27.2 percent) was that of *People's* News N Views telecast at 9 pm daily.

TABLE 3: Most Often Watched Prime Time News and Debate Shows on Malayalam TV Channels

News and Debate Shows of Channels	N (N=512)	% (N=512)
<i>Asianet News'</i> News Hour	394	77.0
<i>Manorama News'</i> Counter Point/Prime Time News	341	66.6
<i>Indiavision's</i> News Night	259	50.6
<i>People's</i> News N Views	142	27.7

Source: Survey data

Note: This was a multiple-choice question.

III.3. Political Awareness

In democracies, mass media are known to create awareness on politics and democratic governance. The awareness so created influences public's attitudes and behaviour in varying ways and assist voters in making informed choices at election times (Curran 2005, p. 129). That being an uncontested premise, it was essential to gauge political awareness of the respondents. With that intent, the pre-campaign survey questionnaire had 20 true or false statements relating to various aspects of Kerala politics and issues debated by the prime time news and debate shows telecast by the four channels mentioned above during the election run up to Kerala Assembly Polls, 2011 (see Table 3). Each correct answer of the respondents was given a score of 1. Thus, the total political awareness score could range from 0 - 20. A high awareness would yield a high score and vice-versa. Such an analysis revealed that the respondent had a mean score of 15.6934, which points out to a high political awareness. To examine whether such awareness was extant among the groups of the five socio-demographic variables, the data was subjected to *t*-test in respect of the gender variable, which had two groups, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in respect of other socio-demographic variables where each variable had more than two groups. The significance of the results was reckoned at .05 confidence level.

TABLE 4: Political Awareness and Socio-demographic Variables

Variables and Groups	Group Statistics				t- test Results					
	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Error Mean	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig (2 tailed)		
Gender										
Male	312	16.1635	2.49810	.14142	1.20346	5.279	510	.000		
Female	200	14.9600	2.54574	.18001						
Total	512	15.6934	2.58206							
Variables and Groups	Group Statistics				ANOVA Results					
	N	Mean	Std Dev	Std Error Mean	Between/ Within group	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig	
Age (in years)										
• 18 - 35	208	15.3317	2.59702	.18007	Between Group	53.624	2	4.070	.018	
• 36 - 50	164	15.7927	2.55366	.19941		Within Group	3553.233			509
• > 51	140	16.1143	2.53631	.21436			Group Total			
Total	512	15.6934	2.58206	.11411						3406.857

Education					Between Group	199.065	3	10.508	.000
• SSLC and<	190	15.4263	2.58861	.18780	Within Group	3207.793	508		
• PDC/+2	129	15.0000	2.72718	.24011	Group				
• Graduate	135	16.2000	2.25203	.19382	Total	3406.857	11		
• PG and above	58	16.9310	2.33104	.30608					
Total	512	15.6934	2.58206	.11411					
Occupation					Between Group	328.920	4	13.545	.000
• Unemployed	41	16.1951	2.30456	.35991	Within Group	3077.937	507		
• Homemaker	94	14.4468	2.61763	.26999	Group				
• Student	56	14.9821	3.05995	.40890	Total	3406.857	511		
• Self-employed	162	15.6049	2.47812	.19470					
• Govt./Pvt Service	159	16.6415	2.14146	.16983					
Total	512	15.6934	2.58206	.11411					
Monthly Income (Rs)					Between Group	29.128	2	2.195	.112
• < 15,000	212	15.4104	2.41568	.02716	Within Group	3377.729	509		
• 15,001 - 35,000	215	15.8791	2.60199	.02331	Group				
• >35,001	85	15.9294	2.88175	.03734	Total	3406.857	511		
Total	512	15.6934	2.58206	.11411					

Source: computed from the variables specified

The results reported in Table 4 reveal that all variables, except monthly income, had a statistically significant bearing on political awareness. Between the two gender groups, male had a significantly higher political awareness. In terms of age, the upper aged (> 51 years) had a higher awareness (mean score of 16.1143) followed by the middle age (36 -50 years) respondents who had a mean awareness of 15.7927 and the young (18- 35 years) individuals whose mean score was 15.3317, the lowest.

Among the four education groups, respondents with the highest educational attainment of post graduation and above had the highest political awareness (mean score of 16.9310), followed by graduates (mean score of 16.2000) and those who have studied up to SSLC (mean score of 15.4263). The lowest political awareness (mean score of 15.0000) was among the PDC/+2 educated. There were statistically significant differences in the political awareness of the five occupation groups too. Those employed in Govt. and private sectors had the highest political awareness (mean score of 16.6415) followed by the unemployed (mean score of 16.1951) and the self employed (mean score of 15.6049). The lowest awareness of political matters was among students (mean score of 14.9821) and homemakers (mean score of 14.4468).

From the above results, it could be summarized that political awareness among the respondents was high and it was dependent on all variables except the economic status of the individuals. Those who had a higher political awareness were the male, the upper aged, the highly educated, and the employees of Govt. and private sectors.

IV. CONCLUSION

Media scholars assert that those who watch television regularly would have higher awareness of the subject(s) of the programmes they watch. While scores of researchers have found television news to be a vital source of political awareness (Becker and Dunwoody, 1982; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Miller, 1991; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Bartels, 1993; Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Zao & Chaffee, 1995; Norris et al 1999; Weaver & Drew, 1995, 2001; Graber, 2001), Atkin (1981) sees a link between audiences' exposure to mass media content, their cognition (awareness, knowledge, images of politics), affective orientations (e.g., attitudes toward political leaders, issues and attachment to the political system), and behaviour (e.g., political participation, voting). As political awareness of electorates is known to have a symbiotic relationship with their political behaviour, it was essential to assess political awareness of the viewers of Malayalam news channels. Such an assessment carried out through a battery of 20 true-false statements showed that the sampled respondents as a whole had an appreciably high mean score of little more than 15. All socio demographic variables except economic status had a significant bearing on political awareness. High political awareness was more salient among male, the upper-aged, highly educated, and employees in government and private sectors. Political awareness was low among the females, the homemakers and the students. Here, it must be noted that such gaps are common in all areas of knowledge and these gaps, as knowledge gap scholars have noted, could be narrowed through sustained communication efforts (Chaffee., & Kanihan, 1997; Donohue et al., 1975; Tichenor et al., 1970).

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