

THE EDITORIAL INFLUENCE
OF THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES AND INDEPENDENT
ON ELECTIONS IN PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA

by

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An Abstract

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The role of the news media in election campaigns has become an important area of inquiry for both political scientists and journalists. This study attempts to examine one area of media influence on elections by studying the relationship between editorial endorsements in the St. Petersburg Times and Evening Independent and elections in Pinellas County, Florida, over a thirteen-year period. Most of the hypotheses tested in studying this relationship were derived from Maxwell McCombs' theory that the strength of newspaper endorsements is greater where there are fewer other variables available to influence a voter's decision or from the theory by Rivers, Peterson and Jenson that newspaper endorsements are most important in elections which have the least salience for the voter. I considered such variables as the presence or absence of party labels, the presence or absence of an incumbent in the contest and the type of election and type of race. The hypotheses were tested through the analysis of the results of 250 Pinellas County election contests between 1962 and 1974. The contests selected included all elections during that period for president, U.S. senator, governor, Public Service Commissioner, county commissioner, school board member, and local judge and all referenda, except school millage elections, for which complete information was not available.

I found endorsed candidates had an advantage over nonendorsed candidates in nearly every type of election. Across all elections, candidates endorsed by the newspapers won 67.1 percent of the time and had a mean percentage of the vote 11.6 points higher than their nearest rivals. Endorsed issues won 81.3 percent of the time, with an average of 67 percent of the vote. I found that endorsement is associated with the greatest advantage in votes in the following types of elections:

1. In state elections, followed by local elections, with the least

advantage in national elections.

2. In nonpartisan elections as opposed to partisan elections and primary elections as opposed to general elections. Endorsement meant the least advantage in partisan general elections.

3. In referenda as opposed to candidate elections.

4. In elections without an incumbent as opposed to elections in which an incumbent is present but not endorsed.

5. In Democratic primaries as opposed to Republican primaries.

6. In general elections in which the endorsed candidate is a Republican as opposed to general elections in which the endorsed candidate is a Democrat.

The vote advantage for endorsed candidates was apparent in all the election years covered by this study, except 1968-69. That period, which was dominated by a Republican landslide at the polls in November 1968, was the only time in which endorsed candidates lost more than they won. The overall findings were consistent with the hypotheses by McCombs and by Rivers and others and with other studies which show newspaper endorsements yield an advantage in votes for the endorsed candidate. However, the vote advantage for endorsed candidates in this study appeared to be larger than that found for candidates in previous studies in Oregon, New Mexico and elsewhere. We still cannot say with certainty that the endorsements in the Times and Independent caused a particular number of voters to cast their votes for the endorsed candidates. Newspaper endorsements are only one factor in the political environment. However, the strong association between endorsements and votes for endorsed candidates indicates that the Times and Independent apparently do have an important influence on elections in Pinellas County.