



2019

Letter from the Department Chair

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Recommended Citation

Shaw, Greg M. () "Letter from the Department Chair," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 24

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol24/iss1/4>

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Letter from the Department Chair

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As we approach the quarter-century mark in the life of *Res Publica*, the vital conversations here continue to reflect the excellent work done by our students on questions of international and domestic politics. In an age of contested truth, as some would have it, these papers deepen our understanding of attitude formation and opinion holding. These concepts go a long way toward shaping how ordinary citizens view an increasingly interconnected world. As the velocity information – both useful and not – increases, citizens must sort through a daily welter of messages in order to make sense of their places in the world.

Marshall McLuhan, the 1960s media critic, *almost* got it right when he said that “the medium is the message.” Partisans, both in the US and abroad, routinely exhibit confirmation bias in their selections of news media outlets. In order to tame the information tide, it certainly makes sense that people will dramatically limit their selections. Given the cognitive cheapness of ideological heuristics, it’s perhaps no surprise that these figure prominently among consumers’ decision rules. The nature of the media source certainly matters in how it appeals to news readers, as Gaoming Zhu found in her study of Chinese readership of various news media. However, it also turns out that content still matters, as Ben Nielsen documents in his study of college students and how they respond to emotional versus reason-based arguments. Both of these projects involved collection of original data through surveys they constructed.

Laura Bullock studied social media use among political candidates and documented the power of active cultivation of voters via online platforms. Not only does content matter, but the mode of engagement shows clear advantages when correctly targeted, especially at young people. Extending these themes, Veronica Torres Luna interviewed Latinos living in the Bloomington/Normal area and found that, beyond whatever media messages reach Latino community members, their citizenship status also played important roles in shaping their civic engagement.

Some of what we learn here is that while the nature of the news media – liberal versus conservative, emotional versus not, etc. – can be influential, people retain a significant amount of agency over how they shop for information and what they do once they encounter it. The student research published here exhibits diverse research strategies, but the findings come together to paint a coherent picture of citizens retaining significant autonomy in the midst of a noisy world.

I extend particular gratitude to our editorial team: Annie Crumbaugh, Ben Nielsen, and Gaoming Zhu, and their assistant editor Daniel Maisch. They have skillfully brought to print some of the best work done this year by our students writing on political topics, and we are very happy to see this great tradition continue.

Greg Shaw