LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS
AND VOTER SUPPORT FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

By

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Television has become "the" medium of the masses in contemporary America. However, there has been very little systematic investigation about television's impact upon agents of political authority, such as municipal police agencies.

This research analyzes potential linkages between voter support for local police and voter viewing habits of local television news. The impact of television news upon voter support for police is assessed in the context of a multivariate model, which includes media and non-media predictor variables. Voter "support" for a municipal police agency is deemed a multidimensional concept and is measured in absolute and relative terms.

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that local television news has minimal or no impact (positively or negatively) upon voter attitudes toward local police agencies. The inability of media and non-media variables to explain voter support for municipal law enforcement indicates the need for a completely new paradigm to guide research in this niche of criminal justice.

INTRODUCTION

This research examines selected empirical relationships between two important socio-political phenomena in contemporary America. The first phenomenon is the viewing of local television news by voters; the second phenomenon is voter support for local law enforcement. Obviously, a statistical assessment of possible relationships between these two phenomena provides information with important theoretical and practical implications for communications, law enforcement and political science.

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The social relevance of relationships between local television news and support for law enforcement is easily derived from two, readily accepted generalizations of social science research. (1) Local law enforcement agencies constitute highly visible, "frontline" agencies of modern American government. Perhaps as much as any other public agency, they routinely represent or symbolize political authority and social order in the American democracy. (2) Television is genuinely "the" medium of the masses. In several studies conducted during the past twenty-five years, voters have increasingly identified television as their principal, if not exclusive, and most credible source of information about government, politics and public affairs (Bower 1985:16+17; Bower 1973:99-106; Steiner 1963:130-31).

To date, these two elements of social science have surprisingly remained largely independent of one another. Scholars of communications have generally focused their research efforts regarding the impact or "effects" of television viewing upon two areas: (1) the behavior and attitudes of children, and (2) the attitudes or decisions of voters during political campaigns (Cassata and Skill 1985:44-92; Comstock 1980:123-148; Comstock 1978:385-451; McQuail 1984:175-211; Roberts and Bachen 1982:29-78). Scholars of criminal justice have focused their research efforts regarding public support for local law enforcement upon the socio-economic status of "supporters" or "non-supporters" (McCaghy et al. 1968:17+18; Block 1971:100; Smith and Hawkins 1973:137; Fowler 1974:161; Lovrich and Taylor 1976:206; Thomas and Hyman 1977:314; Walker 1977:8; Poister and McDavid 1978:145; Baker et al. 1979:240; Scaglion and Condon 1980:493; Ross and Snortum 1982:23; Marenin 1983:102), the extent and nature of personal contacts between citizens and police (Furstenberg and Wellford 1973:402; Smith and Hawkins 1973:141+142; Walker 1977:10; Poister and McDavid 1978:146; Marenin 1983:102; Parks 1976:99; Dean 1980:462-466), and the citizen's actual or potential (fear of) victimization by crime (Block 1971:95+97; Smith and Hawkins 1973:139+140; Parks 1976:99; Thomas and Hyman 1977:314+315; Ross and Snortum 1982:29; Sharp 1981:976; Marenin 1983:102).

The absence of local television news as an important element of existing research paradigms, which are constructed to evaluate citizen support for local law enforcement, is somewhat perplexing. In addition to the sheer scope or pervasiveness of television news as an informational source, the content and special nature of local television news would seem to make that medium and that particular program ripe candidates for inclusion in a research agenda regarding citizen views of law enforcement. (Much of the typical thirteen minute "news" portion of a local television news broadcast is devoted to coverage of unlawful violent acts or other tragedies/accidents.