

Chapter 9

It's Not Only Rock and Roll: The Influence of Music Preferences on Political Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

In today's multi-media environment, citizens receive more politically- and socially-charged messages than ever before. Yet our understanding of how media messages shape political attitudes is limited to a narrow set of sources, such as campaign ads and news coverage. Drawing on research in public opinion and political communication, this research examines a highly pervasive form of communication that often has overt political content, yet one that has been largely overlooked by scholars: music. Measured through an original survey (N = 888), findings show that music genre preferences are significant predictors of key political attitudes, even when controlling for other known influences such as demographic factors and partisanship. Additionally, findings show that the mechanism of influence is not through direct exposure to the content of the music (i.e., the lyrics), but rather through the listener's association with the genre and group-level norms.

INTRODUCTION

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over. - Joe Hill, labor organizer and songwriter

In the study of political communication we explore many different sources of political information such as campaign advertising, broadcast and cable news coverage, political speeches, newspaper content, radio programming, various forums found on the Internet, and entertainment such as comedy shows. One form of communication that often contains political information but is regularly overlooked is music. This chapter largely draws on scholarship on public opinion and political communication to examine

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music effects, an area developed primarily by social psychologists. In this regard, the main argument is that music is a potentially powerful transmitter of political information and therefore warrants further study as it pertains to political attitudes and behavior.

Through an original survey designed to explore the relationship between music preferences and political attitudes and political behavior (N = 888), this chapter demonstrates that music and politics are often correlated at the individual-level for listeners of particular genres of music. This survey is designed to examine the more detailed political attitudes that previous research has left untapped. To provide direction for future research and to better approximate the causal mechanism of influence, this chapter develops a novel theory that attempts to explain the group level influences of music on individual-level political attitudes and behaviors.

Music is a pervasive form of communication, especially among youth. National studies conducted by the Kaiser Foundation found that on average, individuals who reported having attended “some college” listen to music for two hours per day where they only spend 40 minutes reading print media (Roberts, et al., 2005), and youth aged 8-18 spend on average two-and-a-half hours per day listening to music (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Granted, not all music contains political information or coherent political messages, but some music does. In fact, some genres of music are thought to identify overtly with political ideologies, such as country music (conservative) or folk (liberal). The question that drives this research is: What influence does music have, if any, on political attitudes and behaviors? If youth in particular spend so much time listening to music, and music often sends political messages, then it is likely that some effect would be observed, and this effect is likely to be similar to what we would expect to find from traditional media.

While music is similar to other media formats in its ability to convey information, it is different because it is mainly a form of entertainment – not a primary source of political information. Because music is entertaining, its potential to inform and influence listeners may seem questionable to some. However, music may be influential *because* it is entertainment and may attract an audience that would otherwise avoid public affairs programming in exchange for entertainment (Prior, 2007). While we see evidence of preference-based selective exposure minimizing the persuasive and informative effects of media today (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2013), perhaps music is different because political information in music is a byproduct of first-order entertainment seeking, and therefore not as susceptible to informational selective exposure (Baum, 2005). In other words, music may be a significant source of influence because it is attractive to people who would otherwise tune out of political information; coincidentally, these are the same populations that are most susceptible to media effects (Converse, 1962).

In order to warrant pursuing a broader research agenda on the effects of music as a source of political information, it is imperative to first establish that music constitutes a form of political communication and then assess the extent to which it is influential on political opinion and behavior. This study presents an exploratory analysis of music as an influential source of political information. It does so by presenting empirical evidence that supports viewing music as a significant form of political communication. Subsequently, this chapter develops a theoretical mechanism through which music influences individual political attitudes by approaching the problem in terms of social groups, rather than direct content effects or simple demographics. Based on the findings and conclusions discussed herein, a theoretical framework to guide future inquiry is offered.

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