

Rhetoric that resonates

Dial testing gauges voters' reactions in real time

Undecided voters are important to any election, perhaps no more so than in this year's presidential contest.

"With over 40 percent of the country turning away from parties and identifying as independents, a central question determining who becomes our next president is which campaign will best persuade and turn out weak partisan and undecided voters," says JMU communication studies professor Dan Schill, an expert in political communication and media and politics.

But what communication resonates with the undecided voter to cast his or her ballot for a particular candidate?

Schill has been gauging voters' reactions to the messages of political hopefuls since 2007. Using dial testing, in which focus groups of undecided voters turn hand-held dials from 1 to 100 to express their reaction to points made in a given speech or debate, Schill tracks the

average of the responses second-by-second to see which arguments resonate.

"Dial testing shows us how and why these voters are responding to the candidates in real time," he says.

Schill and Rita Kirk of Southern Methodist University—where Schill taught before joining JMU in 2013—have worked with CNN as researchers to help the network formulate its

political coverage during each of the past three presidential campaigns.

Several of Schill's students at JMU have helped enlist undecided voters to participate in dial testing and served as research assistants at live events.

'The opportunity gave me a firsthand look at political messaging theory in practice.'

— JOE DEMSKI ('16),
Schill's former research assistant

Professor Dan Schill has conducted on-air dial testing of undecided voters for CNN to help the network formulate its coverage during each of the past three presidential elections.

