



Media exposure and the engaged citizen: How the media shape political participation



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ABSTRACT

Media exposure is widely known to increase institutional forms of political participation such as voting. Less well understood is whether media exposure also affects protest, a less institutional form of engagement. This paper examines the mechanics through which this relationship operates by considering the media's direct and indirect effect on voting and protesting, via political trust, efficacy, and knowledge. We make these comparisons by analyzing the unique Jennings panel dataset that collects information on respondents at three separate points. The results show that media exposure affects voting more than protesting and that these relationships operate through different mechanisms. While media exposure leads to voting because it increases political knowledge, it is associated with protest via external political efficacy. Furthermore, while this relationship is causal for voting it is only correlational for protest. The results illustrate the importance of disentangling forms of political engagement when considering media effects.

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1. Introduction

The media are a vital institution of democracy, operating as the central mechanism through which citizens learn about and engage with the democratic process (Boulianne, 2011; Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Klandermans, van der Toorn, & van Stekelenburg, 2008; Livingstone & Markham, 2008; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Theoretical explanations of this connection highlight both the media's direct role in providing citizens with information about the political process as well as its indirect role in fostering attitudes and resources, such as trust, feelings of efficacy, and political knowledge, that encourage engagement.

To date, this research has focused on the relationship between media and institutional forms of political action, particularly voting (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Livingstone & Markham, 2008; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). However, the case has been made that it is also important to consider the media's connection to non-institutional forms of participation, such as protesting (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Since media coverage of institutional politics and electoral activity is both more frequent and more positive than the media attention accorded to protest campaigns (Boyle, Mcluskey, Devanathan, Stein, & McLeod, 2004; McLeod, 2000; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001), it cannot be assumed that the effect of media exposure on voting and protesting will be the same. This study seeks to develop a better understanding of these relationships by comparing the effect of exposure to the media on voting and protesting. We do so by considering the mechanics through which this exposure may be directly or

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indirectly related to these two modes of political engagement.

First, media exposure could have a direct effect on engagement. If media exposure is higher among the kinds of people already disposed to participate in the political process, then this relationship is conditional. If increases in media usage also lead to further political activity then this relationship is causal. Newspapers may, for example, remind readers of upcoming elections, the opening hours of polling stations, and/or the location of protest events.

Second, the effect of media exposure may be indirect if it is associated with, or increases, other predictors of political engagement. Here we consider three such predictors – trust, external political efficacy, and knowledge – that have been widely considered important in previous work on the media–politics relationship (Appendix A). If the kinds of people who use the media more are also the kinds of people who have higher levels of trust, external efficacy, and knowledge then this relationship is correlational. If media usage increases the amount of trust, external efficacy, and/or knowledge people have and this, in turn, increases their engagement, then this relationship is causal. That is, citizens who engage with the media not only become more socially and politically aware but also gain a sense that they can and should affect social change.

In order to consider these multiple scenarios, we take advantage of the unique Jennings and Stoker (2004) panel dataset. This dataset, originally designed to study youth political socialization, asks the same respondents about their institutional and non-institutional political participation as well as their media exposure,¹ political knowledge, trust, and external efficacy at three separate time points. The fact that this dataset contains multiple measures for the same individuals allows us to ascertain the extent to which there are direct and indirect effects of media usage on participation and to also ascertain whether these effects are correlational or causal. Our analyses show that media exposure has both a direct and indirect association with voting and protesting but that the nature of these connections is different.

The direct effects of the media are not only stronger in the case of voting, but they are also more likely to be causal. When individuals increase their media exposure over time, they also increase their propensity to vote. However, the relationship between media exposure and protesting is simply correlational. The type of individual who uses more media is more likely to protest but increasing an individual's media consumption over time does not increase their propensity to protest. In addition, the relationship between media exposure and voting is mediated by political knowledge, whereas, the relationship between media exposure and protesting is mediated by external political efficacy.

¹ The Internet is not assessed in this analysis because the data for the study were collected between 1965 and 1997, a period during which Internet use was either non-existent or marginal. A discussion of the implications of the Internet for participation is presented in the conclusion.

2. The media and political engagement

2.1. Mass media and institutional and non-institutional political engagement

The importance of mass media in contemporary society has sparked a wide array of research on the individual-level consequences of media exposure. In particular, an expansive body of work examines the role of media exposure in shaping institutional political participation, particularly voting (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Lawson & McCann, 2005; McLeod et al., 1999; Putnam, 2000). Livingstone and Markham (2008), for example, show that exposure to the mass media and, in particular, listening to political radio and engaging with news is associated with a significantly higher propensity to vote. Other work finds that reading the newspaper is associated with an increased likelihood of both voting and participating in political campaigns (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). While this work shows that media use is related to voting, the causal direction through which this relationship operates is unclear. Is it that people who are heavy users of media are more likely to vote or is it that those who vote then seek out media coverage (Livingstone & Markham, 2008)? Furthermore, few studies examine the relationship between media use and protest behavior (except Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

This is significant because there are several reasons to expect that the effect of media exposure differs for voting and protesting. Mainstream media coverage of protest and electoral politics differ in both the amount and tone of the coverage each of these forms of engagement receive and this could differentially impact the mobilizing potential of the media across these modes of participation. Research consistently shows that activities that are either outside the normal range of routine politics or that threaten the status quo receive either little coverage or no coverage at all (Boyle et al., 2004; McCarthy, McPhail, & Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2001) although there is evidence that this is shifting with recent changes in the media environment (Weaver & Scacco, 2013). A principle means through which the media fosters voting is by providing mobilizing information, informing viewers as to where, when, and how to participate in elections (Schussman & Soule, 2006; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2002). Even if the media does not cover a local election race, the media covers the election at the state or national level, providing information on the dates and locations of polling. Because protest events get less coverage than institutional politics, such as voting, the media can provide less mobilizing information to potential participants.

In addition to the low levels of protest coverage, protest events that are covered do not necessarily benefit from the positive framing that electoral politics often receive in the media. It has for some time been clear that media coverage often undermines movement goals, members, and issues (Giltin, 1980). As Smith et al. (2001, p. 1397) note, “even when movements succeed at obtaining the attention of mass media outlets, media reports portray protests in ways that may undermine social movement agendas”. Empirical work supports this assertion. Media protest coverage tends

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