



Quality press and voter turnout: Evidence for causal effects and its underlying mechanisms



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 May 2015

Accepted 11 January 2016

Keywords:

Turnout

Quality newspapers

Political participation

EU

ABSTRACT

Voting is a central aspect of political participation. Although there seems to be a widespread agreement about the beneficial consequences of reading quality newspapers on turnout, there is a lack of causal evidence. We investigated whether the reading of quality newspapers can increase turnout. In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding, we also investigated whether efficacy, interest, knowledge, and distrust mediate newspapers' impact on turnout. A panel study with two waves was utilized in the run-up to the 2014 EU parliamentary election. Analyses indicate that exposure to quality newspapers increased turnout and that efficacy and knowledge mediated this effect.

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Voting is one of the most important activities for citizens to participate in the political process. The goal of elections is to associate the policy preferences of the electorate with the political decisions of the elected representatives (Powell, 2000). A high turnout rate is beneficial for fulfilling this goal. Hence, the low and declining levels of voting turnout in many countries have been causing serious concerns about democracy's well-being (Flickinger & Studlar, 1992). Especially the European parliamentary elections have been suffering from low turnout rates, starting with 62% in 1979 and decreasing to 43% in 2014 (European Parliament, 2014). Although there are some countries with high turnout rates in the 2014 election (e.g., Belgium 90%, Luxemburg 90%), most European member states (21 out of 28) show turnout rates below 50%, with Slovakia having the lowest turnout rate (13%).

The news media are an essential part of any democratic system. They provide a substantial amount of political information. Exposure to the news media can have a variety of consequences, including, but not limited to effects on political knowledge gains and gaps (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), perceived issue importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), or how individuals interpret differently framed topics (Entman, 1993), and thus the news

media may contribute to the development, reinforcement, change, or stabilization of political attitudes (Maurer, 2014), and political behavior (Becker & Scheufele, 2014).

Of great interest, previous research has shown that the mass media can influence political participation (Wolling & Emmer, 2014). Most importantly for the present study, especially quality newspapers are generally assumed to contribute positively to turnout rates (see below). Notwithstanding the widespread faith in the beneficial consequences of quality newspaper reading on turnout, the causal relationship between reading and turnout is still far from clear.

In the present paper, we will discuss theory and research on voter turnout first. Afterwards, we discuss previous research on media effects on turnout. This body of research shows that mass-mediated content can positively influence turnout. Then, we present an empirical study using a two-wave panel design by investigating the quality press' effects on turnout during the 2014 EU parliamentary election in Austria. We contribute to the literature by offering supplementary empirical evidence for the beneficial consequences of reading quality newspapers on political participation. Although there seems to be a widespread agreement among scholars about these beneficial consequences on turnout, there has clearly been a lack of causal evidence. Furthermore, we present a mediation analysis suggesting that this effect operated mainly through two mechanisms. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the literature, including its societal consequences.

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1. General research on voter turnout

1.1. Theoretical models

[Downs \(1957\)](#) presented an economic theory of democracy that has shaped subsequent scholarly work. According to his rational choice perspective on voter turnout, an individual is more likely to vote when the reward that the individual will gain from voting is higher. The reward is assumed to be higher when the perceived benefit from having one's preferred candidate or party win is viewed as higher, and when the perceived probability that the individual's vote will change the election outcome is viewed as greater. In addition, whereas the costs of voting, such as time and other resources, decrease reward, the psychic satisfaction an individual can gain from participating in an election will increase reward.

[Harder and Krosnick \(2008\)](#) built their theorizing upon [Downs' \(1957\)](#) work but used a "slightly different" (p. 526) conceptual framework. They argued that the likelihood of voting increases the more motivation or ability an individual has to vote, and decreases the more difficult voting is for the individual. They argued for a joint multiplicative function of these three factors: likelihood of voting = (motivation × ability)/difficulty. The multiplicative term points to the fact that a high motivation, or a high ability, or a low difficulty is not sufficient to ensure participation. A disadvantageous score on any one of the three factors may prevent voting. Harder and Krosnick argued that Downs' concepts of benefit, perceived probability, and psychic satisfaction are components of motivation. Furthermore, the costs term is part of the difficulty.

When applied to the perspective of the current paper, media coverage may influence any one of the three factors. However, as [Green and Gerber \(2008\)](#) noted, the success or failure of any potential mobilizing mass-mediated content "hinges on whether it increases the audience's motivation to participate" (p. 132). These theoretical ideas are helpful when discussing the media effect on turnout (see [Glaser & Finn, 2013](#), for a discussion of other theoretical approaches on turnout).

1.2. Empirical findings

[Geys \(2006\)](#) presented empirical evidence brought forward through a meta-analysis of aggregate-level studies. The author concentrated on the effect of socio-economic, political, and institutional variables. He found that, for example, turnout is higher when the population is smaller and the election closer. Furthermore, this meta-analysis revealed that the institutional procedures governing the course of the elections strongly affect turnout. For instance, compulsory voting and easier registration procedures substantially increase turnout.

Previous research ([Geys, 2006](#); [Harder & Krosnick, 2008](#)) has also indicated that a citizen's turnout behavior is a joint function of the person's social location (e.g., wealthier, older, and more highly educated people vote at higher rates), psychological predispositions (e.g., people who feel a personal sense of civic duty and people having a great sense of political efficacy turn out more), the procedures involved in voting (e.g., compulsory voting and easier registration procedures stimulate voting), and characteristics of the specific election (e.g., turnout is higher when the election is closer, i.e., when a small percentage vote gap between the first and second candidate in the race exists).

2. Voter turnout and the media

The mass media are central to democracy. No other technology in human history has had the potential to disseminate as much political information to dispersed audiences. This potential was

already acknowledged by the European scholar [Stieler \(1695/1699\)](#) back in the 17th century. Until the early 20th century, newspapers were the unrivaled major source of daily news. Although their leading role has been challenged by radio and television, and most recently by the Internet, newspapers still remain an important source of political information for citizens ([Wolling & Emmer, 2014](#)).

Surprisingly, given the widespread acceptance among scholars of newspapers' beneficial consequences on political participation including turnout, the empirical evidence is less clear than is often believed. Thus, before we present the few studies investigating newspaper effects on turnout, we review the literature on turnout effects by other nonpartisan mass-mediated content for a more thorough understanding: [Gosnell \(1926\)](#) was one of the first to investigate the effects of nonpartisan mass-mediated appeals. He tested the effectiveness of messages encouraging citizens to vote. In fact, his analyses revealed that these appeals increased turnout. [Panagopoulos and Green \(2011\)](#) replicated this basic mobilization effect using a different media channel (i.e., radio advertisements). Similarly, [Bond et al. \(2012\)](#) reported evidence of an experiment on political mobilization messages delivered to millions of Facebook users during the 2010 US congressional elections. The authors assumed that human behavior spreads through social networks. The results indicated that the messages influenced turnout.

The studies reviewed so far tested the effects of mediated content intended by the communicator to increase turnout. We now turn to effects of the news media where there is typically no intention.

2.1. News media

Optimists interpret the consequences of news exposure mainly as a potential to increase political participation, including voting. This supports the notion of a mobilization effect. Nevertheless, the specific content that news organizations produce (i.e., or fail to produce) may also lead to effects in the opposite direction. Rather pessimistic views warn of a potential narcotization of the electorate, a promotion of cynicism and disaffection, and an inhibition of political interest and the acquisition of politically relevant information, which may ultimately lead to a suppression of participation in a democratic political system ([Morgan & Shanahan, 1992](#)). Stated differently, heavy news media use in itself or the type of news that modern news media environments provide may also have a negative effect on political participation, for example through its impact on decreasing political trust ([Capella & Jamieson, 1997](#)). According to [Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, and Oegema \(2006\)](#), this claim is inspired by studies showing that the content of news media is increasingly negative ([Patterson, 1993](#)) or that television has diminished civic engagement ([Putnam, 2000](#)). This rather pessimistic perspective is known as the malaise hypothesis (see [Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999](#); [Mutz & Reeves, 2005](#); [Robinson, 1976](#)). It must be noted that the latter claim is made—according to our reading of the recent literature—merely with the entertainment orientation of television ([Holtz-Bacha, 1990](#); [Morgan & Shanahan, 1992](#)) or the tabloidization of the press ([Esser, 1999](#)) in mind.

Importantly, previous research revealed direct effects of news media exposure on turnout. A seminal study on this issue is [Della Vigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#), analyzing the entry of Fox News into US cable markets and its impact on voting. The researchers were mainly interested in the so-called Fox News effect; that is, the impact of the introduction of Fox News—which had been repeatedly accused of promoting conservative political positions—on the Republican vote share (i.e., persuasion). What is more important for the present paper is that they also analyzed the impact of the market entry on turnout rates (i.e., mobilization). In fact, analyses

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