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### Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior

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**Chapter 4**

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**A MIXED REPORT:  
THE EFFECTS OF STRATEGIC AND SUBSTANTIVE NEWS CONTENT  
ON POLITICAL CYNICISM AND VOTING**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,  
co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.*

**Abstract**

This chapter examines the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism, turnout intention and voter uncertainty, drawing on two experiments ( $n = 451$ , 18–25 year-olds). We found that among lower political knowledgeable citizens, all news content induces turnout intention, but strategic news content also induces cynicism. For the higher knowledgeable citizens, we found that the combination of strategic and substantive news content slightly decreases cynicism and that substantive news makes these citizens reconsider their vote choice. Our results suggest that the effects of news content are not either stronger for lower knowledgeable citizens or for the higher knowledgeable: some effects are stronger among the first group and other effects are stronger among the second. Remarkably, we only found favorable or neutral effects among the higher knowledgeable, while we found both favorable and unfavorable effects among the lower knowledgeable.

## Introduction

To most citizens, the media are important sources of political information, as are the conversations they have with acquaintances who also receive information from the media (Graber, 1988, 2001; Mutz, 1998). In recent years, evidence suggests that media reporting has changed: substantive news has become less prevalent as strategic news becomes more prevalent and polls are published regularly (e.g. Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008a; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Scholars worry about the unfavorable effects that this shift may have and indeed found that strategic news coverage can induce political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002) and reduce voter turnout (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). In Chapter 2, we found that substantive news content may have favorable effects; it can reduce cynicism on the part of younger citizens.

To further explore the effects news of content on political cynicism and voter behavior, this chapter draws on two experiments conducted during a local election campaign. We both study the potentially unfavorable effects of strategic news content and the potentially favorable effects of substantive news content. However, often news items do not consist of either strategic or substantive news, but they contain a combination of both. It is therefore highly relevant to determine the effects of strategic and substantive news content separately, as well as combined, which we both do in this chapter and which was not done before.

By studying the effects on both cynicism and voter behavior, we aim to obtain a bigger picture of news media effects on attitudes and behavior (see also the Introduction of this dissertation). Many scholars who study the effects of news use on voter behavior concentrate on turnout (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a; Min, 2004; Schuck & De Vreese, 2009; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). We propose to add another aspect of voter behavior: uncertainty (see also Chapter 3). Nowadays, citizens hesitate more and longer which party to vote for than a few decades ago (Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Surprisingly, the effects of different sorts of news content on voter uncertainty were not studied before.

In several studies, political knowledge was found to be an important moderator of media effects. The evidence is mixed however: some scholars find stronger effects for low knowledgeable respondents (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), while others find stronger effects for high knowledgeable respondents (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Nelson, et al., 1997). We argue that both may be true: some effects are larger for the lower knowledgeable, while other effects are larger for the higher knowledgeable. We argue that the unfavorable effects of

strategic news may be larger for lower knowledgeable citizens, while the favorable effects of substantive news may be larger for higher knowledgeable citizens.

This study focuses on younger citizens. They lack political experience and did not yet have the opportunity to develop stable attitudes and behavior, since politics is relatively new to them (Jennings & Niemi, 1978). Young people cannot yet rely on a broad base of knowledge they gathered in the past; consequently it is relatively hard for them to place a news item in a broader context (Graber, 2001; Lau & Redlawsk, 2008). The influence of parents and school decreases and peers – such as friends, colleagues and the media – become more important. Young citizens are therefore susceptible to news media information (McLeod & Shah, 2009; Sears, 1983; Sears & Valentino, 1997). Recently, some scholars studied the relationship between news use and political cynicism and found effects among the young (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), while we even found effects *only* among younger people (see Chapter 2). For this reason we focus on younger citizens in the age of 18 to 25 years old, who undergo their first voting experiences.

### **Unfavorable Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior**

Many scholars who have studied the effects of media content on political attitudes and behavior have focused on unfavorable effects. In these studies, attitudes and behavior were linked to a variety of media content, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative coverage (Min, 2004; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996), and strategic frames in news coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). In this chapter, we focus on the latter: strategic frames in news coverage about political actors (politicians and political parties).

Framing concerns the way information is expressed, in which context information is placed and which aspects are emphasized (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Iyengar & McGrady, 2005). A framing effect occurs when emphasis on specific considerations causes an individual to focus on these considerations when forming his or her opinion (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). These effects can either be caused by an issue-specific frame which pertains to a specific topic or event or by a generic frame which is more general in nature and can pertain to all news topics (De Vreese, et al., 2001; De Vreese, 2003). In this study we focus on the effects of all strategic news content, which is a generic frame.

According to Cappella & Jamieson, *strategic news coverage* includes coverage of political gains and losses (often based on poll results), the power struggle between political

actors, their performance and the public perception of their performance. Strategic news also includes horserace or game-oriented news and often words of warfare and (sports) games are used (Jamieson, 1992 in: Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Other scholars have supplemented this with the electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalition formation and non-substantive attacks of one political actor on another (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). Metacoverage – stories about the role of the news media itself and about political actors' efforts to influence the media (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Esser & D'Angelo, 2003, 2006) – is also regarded as a feature of modern news reporting that is related to strategic news, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Cappella & Jamieson (1997) suggested that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political participation, a hypothesis which they have called the “spiral of cynicism”. Citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, as well as for an interpretation of the context in which they place the information (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). News reporting in the media is to a high extent defined by the strategic frames that provide meaning to political events and political actors' behavior. When the media mainly report the strategies political actors pursue in order to gain or affirm their positions, and their motives are reduced to their individual interests, citizens may start to believe that political actors primarily act in their own self-interest. In this way, strategic news coverage may induce political cynicism. In other words, strategic framing in terms of political actors' personal interest instead of the public interest, results in political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Also, since political actors are believed to act in their own interest, citizens may believe it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions and this may reduce their willingness to turn out (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, based on extant research, we hypothesize that *strategic news content induces cynicism (H1a) and reduces turnout intention (H1b)*.

Several scholars have found evidence for these hypotheses; they have shown that strategic news coverage unfavorably affects political attitudes: it induces political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, *et al.*, 2001) and reduces turnout intention (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001), although not equally for all citizens. These results have been put into perspective. In Chapter 2 we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism and De Vreese (2004) found that effects are short lived and nonexistent over time. Others found that effects on cynicism and turnout intention are contingent on other factors; they found that the effects are moderated by personal characteristics (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001) and contingent on the level of strategy

reporting in the news (De Vreese, 2005). The results of extant studies are mixed however and as we show in the next section, the media are not only attributed unfavorable effects, but favorable effects as well.

### **Favorable Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior**

While unfavorable effects of media content have been studied extensively, only recently there has been attention for the favorable effects of media content. News coverage that may have favorable effects is substantive news content, also called issue news. Substantive news content provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). While strategic news may remind citizens about the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes, substantive news may remind citizens about the issues political actors try to solve and about their societal goals and viewpoints. For this reason, substantive news may reduce cynicism and induce turnout, while strategic news may induce cynicism and reduce turnout. Therefore, we hypothesize that *substantive news content reduces cynicism (H2a) and induces turnout intention (H2b)*.

There is evidence on the effects of substantive news content on cynicism and turnout. De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006a) showed that the use of news outlets with high levels of political content increases turnout intention. Likewise, in Chapter 2 we linked content analysis data to survey data and indeed found a negative relationship between substantive news and political cynicism, specifically among young citizens. Also, Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that strategic content leads to higher cynicism and lower turnout intention than issue news. Contrary to these findings, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. We conclude that the evidence is mixed and limited.

### **The Effects of News Content on Voter Uncertainty**

While many scholars studied the effects of news framing on turnout (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006a; Min, 2004; Schuck & De Vreese, 2009; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), we would like to add another aspect of individual voter behavior: uncertainty. As shown in the Introduction, citizens more frequently hesitate which political party they should vote for (uncertainty) and consequently more often do not vote for the same party in two successive elections (volatility) (Drummond, 2006; Gallagher, et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Media may have a role in this increased voter uncertainty and we therefore think it is relevant to explore the effects of different sorts of news content on this phenomenon.

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Some studies on volatility yield useful insights. Söderlund (2008) studied retrospective voting and found that dissatisfaction with the performance of governmental parties is an important reason to switch to another party during the next elections, while satisfaction is a reason to remain loyal. He concludes that policy issues matter when citizens are making a decision whom to vote for. Since citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, it is likely that they obtain the information about policy issues from the media and that the media can therefore induce hesitation and change. Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder (1998) studied electoral volatility and found that on an aggregate level issue news induces electoral volatility for two reasons. First, they found that media attention for issues owned by a specific party induces citizens to choose that party. Second, they found that when the media attribute a specific issue position to a party which resembles a citizen's issue position, this induces the citizens to choose that party. In this way substantive information can dissatisfy citizens with the party they wanted to vote for and induce hesitation. Likewise, substantive information can satisfy citizens with the party they wanted to vote for and also reduce hesitation.

The effects of strategic news on voter uncertainty have not been studied before. Yet if strategic news indeed induces citizens to think that political actors act in their own interest and that it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions, this may make them hesitate about their voting choice. If there is no party which can be trusted, it is much harder to choose. Strategic news can in this case induce uncertainty. However, the idea that no party can be trusted can also make citizens decide to always vote on the same party, because it does not matter which party is in office and in this way strategic news can reduce uncertainty.

In summary, it is hard to predict the effects of substantive and strategic news on voter uncertainty and because it was not studied before, we therefore formulate two open research questions: *(R1) what is the effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty and (R2) what is the effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty?*

### **Mixed Content, Mixed Effects?**

Often, news items do not consist of either strategic or substantive news, but of a combination of both (see Chapter 2). Therefore, we also study the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in one news item, which was not done before. Cappella & Jamieson (1997) studied the effects of exposure to both a news item with substantive information and a news item with strategic information. In one of their studies, they found that the effect of a strategic frame on cynicism was mitigated by an issue frame. Thus, the net

effect seemed to be the sum of the positive effect of strategic news and the negative effect of substantive news. This net effect on cynicism can either be zero when the size of the effects of strategic and substantive news is equal; the effect can be positive when the effect of strategic news is stronger or it can be negative when the effect of substantive news is stronger.

The effect of a news item with both a strategic and substantive content is not necessarily the same as the effect of two items which both contain one of the frames. The combination of both frames in one item may lead to a different interaction. It could be that one of the frames is dominant and that for instance either strategic news always makes citizens more cynical or that substantive news always makes them less cynical. Also, it is possible that the effects of the combination are not the same for attitudes and behavior. Since it is hard to predict what the exact effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in one item will be, we have formulated an open research question: *(R3) what is the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content?*

### **Political Knowledge as a Moderator of Media Effects**

Political knowledge is regarded an important individual level moderator of media effects, but scholars disagree about the direction of this moderation (De Vreese & Lecheler, forthcoming). Some argue that low knowledgeable citizens are more easily affected by news use. For citizens who possess high knowledge, one news item has less impact because it is integrated into a larger existing base of information. Also, high knowledge provides context for interpreting a news item and enables citizens to come up with opposing arguments. Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) therefore argued that less knowledgeable citizens have weaker longer-term internal motivations for their political attitudes and behavior. Others have argued the opposite, that higher knowledgeable citizens are more easily affected by news use. High knowledge facilitates the processing of a news item; since higher knowledgeable citizens make sense of a news item more easily, a news item will have more impact.

The empirical evidence on the moderating effects of political knowledge is mixed as well. Schuck & De Vreese (2006) studied support for EU enlargement and found that citizens with lower levels of political knowledge were susceptible to news frames and more specifically risk frames. Haider-Markel & Joslyn (2001) studied the effects of frames on opinion about gun laws and also found larger effects on low knowledgeable citizens. Likewise, Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that the effect of strategic news on confidence in government and turnout is largest among the least sophisticated citizens – although these authors used education as a proxy for sophistication. Other scholars found

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larger effects for high knowledgeable citizens. Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson (1997) studied the effects of issue frames on opinion and found that more sophisticated citizens were more likely to be affected. Krosnick & Brannon (1993) studied the effects of media priming of the Gulf crisis on presidential evaluations and also found that citizens with higher levels of political knowledge were more susceptible. Druckman & Nelson (2003) studied the effects of issue specific frames on support for a reform bill and found higher effects among more knowledgeable citizens as well.

In summary, we conclude that the effect of knowledge as a moderator is not clear. This can partly be explained by the fact that both the independent and dependent variables in these studies vary. An additional reason may be that the effect is not unidirectional: some effects are larger among lower knowledgeable citizens, while other effects are larger among higher knowledgeable citizens. We would like to argue that the unfavorable effects of strategic news are larger among lower knowledgeable citizens – which is what Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) found – while the favorable effects of substantive news are larger among higher knowledgeable citizens – which was not studied before. While higher knowledgeable citizens have enough context to put a strategic news item into perspective, lower knowledgeable citizens may more easily come to the conclusion that political actors act in their own interest, which in turn affects their attitudes and behavior in an unfavorable manner. Substantive news on the other hand may have a larger impact on high knowledgeable citizens, who can make sense of this information more easily, add it to the knowledge they already have and in this way substantive news can affect their attitudes and behavior in a favorable manner.

We aim to test these arguments and hypothesize that: *(H3a) the unfavorable effects of strategic news content are stronger among citizens with lower levels of knowledge, and (H3b) the favorable effects of substantive news content are stronger among citizens with higher levels of knowledge.* As mentioned before, it is debatable whether voter uncertainty is unfavorable or favorable and therefore we do not include an expectation on knowledge as a moderator of the effect of news content on uncertainty.

### **Data and Method**

#### **Design and Procedure**

To investigate the effects of substantive and strategic news, we use an experiment. In a post-test only, between-subjects experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) a news report with a substantive frame, (2) a news report with a

strategic frame, (3) a news report with a strategic and substantive frame and (4) no news report for the control group. We chose a between-subjects design, because we wanted to compare experimental conditions, we did not aim to determine within-subject change before and after exposure.

We conducted two online survey experiments, which were comparable, only the policy issue in the stimulus material differed. In both experiments, all respondents first completed a pre-test questionnaire to measure the control variables. Second, respondents in condition 1, 2 and 3 read a news report containing one of the frames, the respondents in condition 4 (the control group) did not read a news report. Finally, all respondents answered the post-test questionnaire to map their levels of political cynicism.

**Data collection.** We used the period before the March 2010 local elections in Amsterdam as our research venue. Our survey data were collected by the department for research and statistics of the city of Amsterdam in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam, in February 2010. We selected a representative sample of young citizens in the age of 18 to 25 years old, who were allowed to vote in local elections for the first or second time in their life. The respondents were selected from the Register Office of the City of Amsterdam. The selected respondents received a letter to participate in an online questionnaire, which means that they filled out the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. Of these selected respondents,  $n = 451$  respondents participated in one of the experiments.<sup>32</sup> A between-group comparison of the control variables revealed no between-group difference and therefore successful randomization on several control variables, except age.<sup>33</sup> For this reason we controlled for age in our analysis.

**Stimulus Material.** In order to increase the external validity of the experiment, we used the same structure as newspaper reports in the Amsterdam based newspaper *Het Parool* have. Also, the newspaper reports were written by a scholar who has worked as a copy editor. For both experiments we made a version for each of the three conditions: a report with a substantive frame, a report with a strategic frame and a report with strategic and substantive frame. For each version, the title and the introduction paragraph were identical. The other paragraphs were different, but we tried to limit the differences between condition 1 and 3 as

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<sup>32</sup> The response rate was 10.26 percent ( $n = 451$ ). We do not perceive this as a problem however. First, representativeness does not increase monotonically with response rates. Second, since we aim to study relationships instead of for example the level of political cynicism, variance is the primary precondition, instead of representativeness (Krosnick, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> No significant variation in cell counts was found for gender ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = .492$ ,  $p = .85$ ), education ( $M = 8.00$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ,  $p = .51$ ), political knowledge ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .88$ ,  $p = .32$ ) and political interest ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .63$ ,  $p = .75$ ). Significant variation in cell counts was found for age ( $M = 21.94$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

well as between condition 2 and 3 as much as possible. All news reports were of similar length.

The newspaper report in each experiment comprised coverage of an issue that was linked to the local election campaign. Recently, scholars have argued that the importance of the topic in the stimulus material can affect the size of framing effects and although the effect of the topic is ambiguous, it is clear that the issue can affect the framing effects and we for this reason we chose a high importance as well as a low importance issue.<sup>34</sup> A poll conducted by collected the department for research and statistics of the city of Amsterdam revealed that education was the most important policy issue for citizens in Amsterdam and for Experiment A we therefore chose this as a high importance issue (see Appendix I). For Experiment B we chose cycling policy as a low importance issue, to which respondents can relate nevertheless (see Appendix J). Almost every young citizen in Amsterdam has a bike and can relate to the topic, but it is not considered highly important.

**Manipulation Check.** We conducted a pilot study on a different convenience sample (students,  $n = 349$ ) to test the manipulation. After being exposed to the stimulus material, respondents were shown five statements and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements, their answers were ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). Two statements were used to measure the “substantiveness” of the reports: (1) the report was mainly about substantive policy issues and (2) the report dealt with politicians’ viewpoints on policies. These two items were combined in a scale of “substantiveness”. Three statements dealt with the “strategicness” of the newspaper report: (1) the report was about parties’ strategies to win the elections, (2) the report was about the political battle between parties and (3) the report was about gains and losses in the polls. The manipulation check revealed successful manipulation: the groups differed on the scales of substantiveness and strategicness, as well on the five separate items.<sup>35</sup> We could therefore consider the stimulus material to be appropriate and ascribe differences between groups in the post-test to the experimental manipulation.

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<sup>34</sup> Haider-Markel & Joslyn (2001) argued that attitudes towards an issue are stronger when a person attaches more meaning to it and therefore high salience issues have stronger framing effects. While Haider-Markel & Joslyn only studied high salience issues, Lecheler, De Vreese, & Slothuus (2009) found results that contradicted their argument: that low importance issue had large effects, while a high importance issue had no effects. Although the exact effect of high and low importance issues is ambiguous, it is clear that the issue can affect the framing effects and we for this reason we chose a high importance as well as a low importance issue.

<sup>35</sup> The perception of substantiveness differed significantly among Group 1 ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) ( $p < 0.01$ ), Group 2 ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) and Group 3 ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). The perception of strategicness differed significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) among Group 1 ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = .93$ ), Group 2 ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) and Group 3 ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

## Measures

**Political cynicism.** We used seven statements as used in Chapter 2 and 3 to measure political cynicism: (1) politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver, (2) the mayor and aldermen are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than abilities to become city-councilor, (4) political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion, (5) politicians do not understand what matters to for the city, (6) politicians are capable of solving important problems and (7) most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing. The items in Chapter 2 and 3 were used to tap political cynicism about national political actors and therefore we translated item 2, 3 and 5 to the local level. The answers on the items were ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). The seven items loaded on one dimension and were recoded to a scale of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .95$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ). The distribution of answers on the seven items is reported in Appendix K.

**Voter behavior.** Turnout intention is measured by asking respondents to indicate with a percentage between 0 and 100 what the chance is that they will actually vote in the upcoming elections ( $M = 80.73$ ,  $SD = 29.50$ ). Voter uncertainty is measured by asking respondents what they would vote if the elections were held today. Those who mentioned a party were coded 0, while those who said they do not know were coded 1, those who said they would not vote were coded as missing (17.4 percent was undecided).

**Political knowledge.** The political knowledge scale is based on two open questions: which political parties constitute the Court of Mayor and Aldermen (score ranges between 0 and 2 parties) and what is the name of the Mayor (score ranges between 0 and 1). These questions were combined to a political knowledge score that ranges from 0 to 3 ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .88$ ).

## Results

Table 4.1 shows the per condition means of political cynicism, for both experiments, as well as separately for Experiment A and Experiment B. Participants in the strategy condition ( $M = 4.11$ ) expressed significantly higher levels of political cynicism than those in the substance and strategy condition ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and those in the control group ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This suggests that strategic news content induces cynicism and thus provides support for H1a. Participants in the substance condition did not express lower levels of cynicism than the control group and therefore H2a is not supported. Remarkably, respondents in the substance & strategy condition expressed the lowest levels of cynicism, especially in

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Experiment A, and while the differences with those in the strategy condition were significant, the difference with the control group was not significant. Nevertheless the results suggest that if news is both relevant in terms of issues and because parties emphasize the differences between them, this makes citizens most trustful about political actors.

Table 4.1: Political Cynicism and Turnout Intention by Experimental Condition

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
Political cynicism total	3.87 (.87)	4.11b (1.04)	3.73c (.94)	3.81x (.91)
*Experiment A: education	3.87 (.91)	4.27e (1.11)	3.61f (.80)	
*Experiment B: cycling	3.87 (.84)	3.95 (.95)	3.85 (1.05)	
Turnout intention 0-100 percent <sup>1</sup>	83.38 (26.12)	83.31 (28.43)	80.87 (29.05)	75.46 (33.45)
*Experiment A: education <sup>2</sup>	85.48 (22.99)	81.00 (30.80)	80.36 (31.36)	
*Experiment B: cycling <sup>3</sup>	80.98 (29.36)	85.63 (25.91)	81.34 (26.94)	

*Note.* Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses).  $n = 451$ , Experiment 1  $n = 164$ , Experiment 2  $n = 171$ , control group  $n = 116$ . All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: bc, ef, ex  $p < .01$ , bx  $p < .05$ .

<sup>1</sup> The average of the three experimental groups ( $M = 82.50$ ,  $SD = 33.45$ ) differs significantly from the control group ( $p < .01$ ).

<sup>2</sup> The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment A ( $M = 82.29$ ,  $SD = 28.54$ ) differs significantly from the control group ( $p < .01$ ).

<sup>3</sup> The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment B ( $M = 82.71$ ,  $SD = 27.26$ ) differs significantly from the control group ( $p < .01$ ).

All experimental groups displayed higher levels of turnout intention than the control group: the average of the three experimental groups together ( $M = 82.50$ ) differed significantly from that of the control group ( $M = 75.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We did not find support for H1b, and results suggest that perhaps H2b should be adapted: not only substantive news, but all news content induces turnout intention. The other way around, one can say that a lack of news will reduce turnout intention.

Table 4.2 shows the level of voter uncertainty. The participants in the substance condition had the highest level of voter uncertainty, while those in the strategy condition had the lowest level, but the differences with the control group were not significant. For this reason, the answers to R1 and R2 are only indicative. It suggests that there is a negative effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty (R1) and that strategic news induces citizens to think it does not matter who is representing them and consequently reduces voter uncertainty.

There was a positive effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty (R2) and this suggests that substantive information makes people think about politics and for this reason consider more alternatives to vote for.

Table 4.2: Voter Uncertainty by Experimental Condition

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
	%	%	%	%
Voter uncertainty	27 <sup>a</sup>	11 <sup>b</sup>	16	17
*Experiment A: education	27	16	12	
*Experiment B: cycling	27 <sup>g</sup>	6 <sup>h</sup>	19	

*Note.* Data entries are percentages.  $n = 451$ , Experiment 1  $n = 164$ , Experiment 2  $n = 171$ , control group  $n = 116$ . All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Reading example: 27 percent of the respondents in the substance condition were undecided which party to vote for, 73 percent did mention a party. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences:  $ab p < .01$ ,  $gh p < .05$ .

We expected the effects of media exposure to be larger for low importance issues than for high importance issues, and we therefore included a high as well as a low importance issue, to make sure the importance of a specific topic would not blur the results. We found mixed results: the effects on cynicism were larger for the high importance issue, while the effects on voter uncertainty were larger for the low importance issue. For turnout intention there was no clear difference.

Table 4.3 shows that with regard to our moderator, we found different results among high knowledgeable respondents than among low knowledgeable respondents. We expected larger unfavorable effects of strategic news among low knowledgeable respondents and larger favorable effects of substantive news among high knowledgeable respondents. This expectation was confirmed for the effect on cynicism. The low knowledgeable in the strategy condition expressed significantly higher cynicism ( $M = 4.45$ ) than those in all other groups, while this effect was absent among the high knowledgeable. This provides support for H3a. There was no favorable effect of substantive news on cynicism, neither among the whole sample nor among the high knowledgeable. However, the high knowledgeable in the substance & strategy condition express lower cynicism than all other groups, this difference is not significant and therefore not enough to support H3b.

Table 4.3: Political Cynicism and Turnout Intention by Condition and Knowledge

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
Political cynicism				
*Low knowledge	3.92 <sup>a</sup> (.88)	4.45 <sup>b</sup> (1.01)	3.89 <sup>c</sup> (.93)	3.85 <sup>d</sup> (.97)
*High knowledge	3.76 (.87)	3.67 (.92)	3.47 (.90)	3.74 (.79)
Turnout intention 0-100 percent				
*Low knowledge <sup>1</sup>	78.36 (29.62)	80.22 <sup>j</sup> (28.02)	76.99 (29.75)	65.40 <sup>l</sup> (37.74)
*High knowledge <sup>2</sup>	93.00 (13.35)	87.29 (28.73)	87.19 (27.01)	90.77 (16.69)

*Note.* Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B  $n = 451$ , low knowledge  $n = 279$ , high knowledge  $n = 172$ . Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: ab, bc, bd, jl  $p < .01$ .

<sup>1</sup> The average of the three experimental groups for low knowledgeable respondents ( $M = 78.47$ ,  $SD = 29.06$ ) differs significantly from the control group ( $p < .01$ ).

<sup>2</sup> The average of the three experimental groups for high knowledgeable respondents ( $M = 88.56$ ,  $SD = 24.68$ ) does not differ significantly from the control group.

The favorable effect of all news on turnout intention was only visible among the lower knowledgeable, while there was no effect at all among the higher knowledgeable. This means that the favorable effect of all news on turnout was stronger for low knowledgeable respondents, which is contrary to what we expected in H3a. This may be explained by the effect that turnout intention was very high among all high knowledgeable respondents: there was no room left for an effect. We therefore conclude that the evidence for H3a is mixed.

Table 4.4: Voter Uncertainty by Condition and Knowledge

	Substantive	Strategic	Substantive and strategic	Control group
	%	%	%	%
Voter uncertainty				
*Low knowledge	28	16	23	23
*High knowledge	25 <sup>e</sup>	4 <sup>f</sup>	5 <sup>g</sup>	9 <sup>h</sup>

*Note.* Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B  $n = 451$ , low knowledge  $n = 279$ , high knowledge  $n = 172$ . Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: ef, eg  $p < .01$ , eh  $p < .05$ .

We had no prior expectation for knowledge as a moderator of the effects of news on voter uncertainty. Table 4.4 reveals only significant effects among the high knowledgeable respondents: those in the substance condition differed significantly from those in all other

groups. This suggests that new information makes only higher knowledgeable citizens reconsider their party choice.

Our last research question concerns the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content (R3). With regard to cynicism, we found that those exposed to a combination of substantive and strategic news content expressed the lowest levels of cynicism. Although the differences with the control group were not significant, the differences with the group exposed to strategic news were significant and we therefore conclude that there is a small effect. We also saw that this difference only existed for the higher knowledgeable; due to the small sample size the difference was not significant, but the difference is nevertheless rather large. This suggests that combination of substantive and strategic news content has a decreasing effect on cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. For voter behavior, there was no effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content. We have summarized all the results in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Hypotheses, Research Questions and Results

Hypotheses and research questions	Results	
H1a: strategy → cynicism ↑	strategy → cynicism ↑	✓
H1b: strategy → turnout intention ↓	strategy → turnout intention ↑	×
R1: strategy → uncertainty?	<i>strategy → uncertainty ↓</i>	.
H2a: substance → cynicism ↓	substance → cynicism no effect	×
H2b: substance → turnout intention ↑	substance → turnout intention ↑	✓
R2: substance → uncertainty?	<i>substance → uncertainty ↑</i>	.
R3: combination of substance and strategy → ?	substance and strategy → turnout intention ↑	.
	<i>substance and strategy → cynicism ↓</i>	.
H3a: low knowledge: unfavorable effects strategy ↑	low knowledge: strategy → cynicism ↑	✓
	low knowledge: strategy → turnout intention ↑	×
H3b: high knowledge: favorable effects substance ↑	<i>high knowledge: substance and strategy → cynicism ↓</i>	✓
	high knowledge: substance → uncertainty ↑	.

*Note.* When results do not differ significantly from another experimental group, but not from the control group, results are written in italics. We indicated whether results provide support for the hypothesis (✓) or do not provide support for the hypothesis (×) or whether there was no hypothesis (.).

### Discussion

This chapter used experiments to study the effects of substantive and strategic news content on political cynicism and voter behavior. We focused on younger citizens, because we think media effects are strongest among this group. We aimed to give balanced picture on media effects, which can be favorable and unfavorable. We found that strategic news content had an unfavorable increasing effect on cynicism, but only among the lower politically knowledgeable. When especially those who have low levels of knowledge are affected by strategic news coverage, then an increase of strategic news content in the media may lead to a spiral of cynicism among this group. On the other hand, we found that all news content had a favorable mobilizing effect on the lower knowledgeable: those exposed to news content expressed higher turnout intention than those not exposed to any news content. This is contrary to Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) who found demobilizing effects of strategic news, but in line with De Vreese & Boomgaarden (2006a) who found mobilizing effects of news outlets with high levels of political information. While substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small favorable decreasing effect on cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. A news item which explains an issue and suggests this issue matters because parties disagree about it, makes higher knowledgeable more trustful. This suggests that one need not be worried about the effects of strategic news, as long as it is substantive as well; the combination of strategic and substantive news has no effect for the lower knowledgeable and a decreasing effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable.

Other results are less easily valued. We found that substantive news makes specifically the high knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. Voter uncertainty is not clearly favorable or unfavorable, but this result suggests that substantive news makes the high knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between parties, which can be interpreted as a favorable development. In the postwar period, voter uncertainty and volatility were low, because many citizens used to vote according to class and religious cleavages, without making their own decision based on ideological evaluations. Our finding yields support for Rose & McAllister's (1986) idea that the increase of voter uncertainty and volatility is a sign that citizens make a party choice more consciously than before. Substantive news seems to stimulate this conscious choice, especially among the higher knowledgeable. On the individual level, we need not worry about these unstable voters. Nevertheless, an increase of hesitating and changing voters can have unfavorable consequences on the system

level. Large shifts in the percentage of votes for each party during elections can make the political system unstable and frequently changing parties in government can erode the stability of governmental policies, especially in consensus democracies with coalition governments.

### **Differences Between the Higher and Lower Knowledgeable**

While earlier studies suggested effects of news content are either stronger for lower knowledgeable citizens or for the higher knowledgeable, we expected that some effects are stronger for the first group and other effects for the second group. Indeed some effects only existed among the lower knowledgeable: the unfavorable increasing effect of strategic news on cynicism as well as the favorable increasing effect of all news on turnout. Other effects only existed among the higher knowledgeable: the favorable decreasing effect of the combination of substantive and strategic news on cynicism as well as the increasing effect of substantive news on voter uncertainty, suggesting they consciously reconsider their choice. This means that we can conclude that knowledge moderates the effects of news content in a different way than most previous studies have suggested. Not all effects are larger for one group, but some effects are larger for the lower knowledgeable and other effects are higher for the higher knowledgeable.

We found both favorable and unfavorable effects on the lower knowledgeable, while we only found favorable effects on the higher knowledgeable. This is remarkable: especially lower knowledgeable seem to be prone to unfavorable media effects. This finding may be contingent on the aspects of citizens' attitudes and behavior which we have studied – media may have unfavorable effects on other aspects of higher knowledgeable citizens' attitudes and behavior. However, if it is true that media specifically affect the lower knowledgeable in an unfavorable manner, this may be a problem for democratic systems in the future.

The differences between lower and higher knowledgeable are increasing. A few decades ago, almost all citizens watched political news, not because they liked it, but because they were confronted with it on the same network as their favorite shows, an effect which was called the “trap effect” (Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002; 2004). Nowadays many more networks are available and consumers can choose to watch networks that do not broadcast political information or only political information related to a specific ideology. Prior (2007) showed for the US that the fragmentation of the media market resulted in a growing gap between more highly educated news junkies on the one hand and the rest of the citizens who consume less politically substantive information on the other hand. The same pattern is probably visible in many European countries. We have shown that any news induces participation among the

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lower knowledgeable and a lack of political information may therefore reduce participation among this group. In an experimental study, information exposure is controlled, while in the real world, citizens can choose to use information – or not to use it. Many lower knowledgeable citizens often choose the latter. If lower knowledgeable citizens consume little political information, this little information may have large effects on their levels of cynicism, either favorable or unfavorable. In this way information can lead to a spiral of cynicism – but also reverse it. For this reason it matters a lot which information they consume – substantive, strategic or both.