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

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## Conclusion

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This dissertation studied the effects of strategic and substantive news content within different campaign contexts in the Netherlands. In many democracies political cynicism has grown, voter behavior has become less stable and turnout fluctuates. The media are blamed in part for these developments and indeed they have unfavorable effects. At the same time, the media have favorable effects as well, as we show in this dissertation. By showing a balanced picture of these effects, we aim to add to the academic and public debate on the role of the media. The studies in this dissertation suggest news content affects cynicism as well as voter behavior, but not equally for all citizens in all situations. In the following, we first summarize our findings, before elaborating on the consequences of our findings. We have summarized the main concepts of this dissertation in Appendix A.

### Summary of the Research Findings

Before answering our research questions, we started in *Chapter 1* by scrutinizing what trust and distrust/cynicism means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our literature review revealed two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. Using open-ended and closed-ended questions, we confirmed these two main dimensions. However, our results also showed that these dimensions consist of more elements than earlier research suggested. Political actors' *reliability* concerns general feelings of their honesty, but also the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country and whether political actors are responsive to the public. Political actors' *competence* concerns general aspects of competence, but also being decisive in taking care of problems and being aware of important problems. Moreover, we found that reasons for negative attitudes are not the same as reasons for positive attitudes towards political actors: persons with negative attitudes had more specific arguments than those with positive attitudes. To our knowledge, this chapter was the first to use open-ended questions to study what citizens mean when they express positive or negative attitudes towards political actors.

In *Chapter 2*, we studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism. In a study combining a content analysis of news media with a panel survey, we tested the unfavorable effects of strategic content as well as the favorable effects of substantive content. We found no across the board effect of strategic news, which is contrary to what we expected based on extant literature. We did find a clear negative effect of

substantive news on political cynicism, but only among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds). In other words: substantive news can make younger citizens less cynical. This finding is in line with extant research that showed that older citizens' attitudes are relatively stable and are not easily changed during a campaign, while younger citizens are still developing their attitudes and can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

In *Chapter 3*, we studied the effect of political cynicism on voter behavior. We argued that cynical citizens can show their discontent in two ways: either by choosing another party or by not voting at all. We therefore studied the effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout. Additionally, we argued that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. For this reason, we included the similarity of the parties a person hesitates or changes between in our measures for voter uncertainty and volatility. Our results showed that cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, we found that cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout.

In *Chapter 4*, we again studied the effects of news content on political cynicism, but this time in an experimental design and furthermore focused on younger citizens (18-25 year-olds). Also, we studied the effects of news content on two aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and voter uncertainty. Additionally, we studied the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive content in one news item. While strategic news content had a positive effect on cynicism for lower knowledgeable persons and substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small negative effect on cynicism for the higher knowledgeable. With regard to voter behavior, we found that any news content increases lower knowledgeable person's turnout intention, while substantive news makes the higher knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. This chapter is the first to study the effect of a news item that combines substantive and strategic news.

We aimed to answer two main research questions in this dissertation. The *first research question* was to what extent strategic and substantive news content affect political cynicism. Our studies yielded a mixed picture. We found a negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism for younger citizens in Chapter 2, and found in Chapter 4 that specifically the combination of substantive and strategic news negatively affects political cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. Furthermore, in Chapter 2 where we combined a content analysis with a survey, we found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism,

while we found a positive effect of strategic news on political cynicism in the experimental study in Chapter 4 for lower knowledgeable persons. The results of Chapter 4 are in line with other experimental studies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001) as well as with a study that combined a content analysis with a survey (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). The latter focused on issue-specific strategic news as well as issue-specific cynicism, while we focused on all strategic news content and cynicism towards political actors in general, which makes it hard to compare the studies.

There may be several reasons for the different results of the experimental designs in Chapter 4 and other studies on the one hand and the content analysis and panel survey design in Chapter 2 on the other hand. The results are probably partly related to methodological differences. In the first design, the short-term effects of exposure to one specific news item or at most a few are measured, while in the second design, the longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content are measured. Also, in the first design, all respondents are randomly exposed to specific news content, while in the second design, respondents select the news content themselves.

Apart from these methodological differences, we also think that the nature of strategic and substantive news have affected the results. Does strategic news only have a short-term effect on political cynicism which vanishes quickly? Does substantive news only have a longer-term effect which builds up after repeated exposure? Both may well be the case. On the short-term, when citizens are exposed to strategic news that mainly reports the strategies political actors pursue, this may induce cynicism. Exposure to substantive news may need some time to build up: if citizens are repeatedly exposed to media that report substantive issues about political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, this may slowly induce positive feelings about these actors.

Does strategic news induce cynicism only when substantive news is lacking or limited? In the real world, news is both strategic and substantive in nature. In the Netherlands, both kinds of news content are balanced (De Vreese, 2008). Moreover, as we have shown in Appendix E, all news outlets combine strategic and substantive news. On the long run, citizens are therefore exposed to a combination of both news frames. As we have shown in Chapter 4, substantive news neutralizes the unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism; the combination of strategic and substantive news even lowers cynicism. This is partly in line with Cappella and Jamieson (1997) who found that issue news did not reduce issue specific cynicism, but that it mitigated the effects of strategic news. This indicates that strategic content only leads to cynicism if it replaces substantive news, whereas in many countries,

strategic frames are added to substantive news. We think that the importance of substantive news is a noticeable contribution to the literature on the relationship between news content and cynicism.

The *second research question* we aimed to answer in this dissertation was to what extent political cynicism affects voter behavior. We have focused on several aspects of voter behavior: turnout intention and actual turnout as well as ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Several authors have shown that cynicism reduces turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). We found that cynicism induces turnout intention in the Netherlands, but it does not affect actual turnout. This may be explained by the fact that apart from abstention, dissatisfied citizens have another option in the Netherlands; they can choose between many different other parties. Indeed, cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Remarkably, the effects of cynicism on uncertainty and volatility have not been studied before. For understanding the effect of cynicism on the complete picture of voter behavior, we think this is an important addition to the literature, especially in consensus democracies with multiparty systems, which we pay attention to later on in this Conclusion.

We discussed the particular implications of each of our studies in each chapter. In the following, we would like to pay attention to some overarching implications. First, we make a few remarks about measuring media effects, political cynicism and voter behavior. Second, we discuss how the increase of political cynicism and changes in voter behavior should be evaluated. Third, we argue that researchers should focus both on favorable and unfavorable effects of news content. Fourth, we discuss the differences between majoritarian and consensus democracies with regard to our research questions. Fifth, we discuss the usefulness of studying media effects among younger citizens, for social scientific research as well as for society.

### **Measuring Media Effects, Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior**

#### **Measuring Political Cynicism and Trust**

Scholars along with opinion leaders are worried about the increase of negative attitudes towards political actors. In order to be able to interpret these changes in the level of political cynicism or distrust, we should be able to determine what an increase of negative attitudes means. We therefore argue that we need a more precise measurement instrument of political cynicism, which fulfills two conditions. It should enable the researcher to distinguish

between different degrees of positivity or negativity and it should include statements about attitudes towards political actors' reliability as well as towards political actors' competence.

First, those who have a moderate degree of cynicism (or even only criticism) differ from those who are not cynical on the one hand and from those who are highly cynical on the other hand. A researcher should be able to determine how cynical citizens are and how many citizens are very cynical. Critics argued that the traditional Dutch cynicism items are not strong enough and are therefore not capable of distinguishing cynics from non-cynics (Dekker, et al., 2006). A measurement instrument should enable a researcher to distinguish between different degrees of positivity or negativity, not only between those who trust and those who distrust political actors. For this reason, we think that a measurement instrument should include several statements that differ in their degree of cynicism. Furthermore, we think that the items should not be dichotomous, but should be scale.

Second, we found that two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: attitudes towards political actors' reliability and attitudes towards political actors' competence (Aberbach, 1969; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). The closed-ended and open-ended questions we used in Chapter 1 confirmed the relevance of these two dimensions. The seven statements we used in Chapter 2 to test the dimensional structure of cynicism revealed that reliability and competence load on one dimension. Apparently, when asked about both dimensions, most cynical citizens confirm both and we consequently found a one dimensional structure, while when asked unaided, many citizens do not mention both. Based on our findings in Chapter 1 we therefore think that a measurement instrument should at least include the key elements of both dimensions, but preferably all.

With respect to *reliability*, a measurement instrument should map (1) general feelings of political actors' honesty, (2) to what extent respondents think that political actors hold their promises, (3) whether respondents think politicians are interested in what is best for the country instead of their own or special interests and (4) whether respondents think politicians are responsive to the public or only interested in their votes. With respect to *competence*, a measurement instrument should map (1) to what extent respondents think political actors are competent and able to do their job, (2) whether respondents think politicians are decisive in taking care of problems and (3) whether respondents think politicians are aware of important problems. When a measurement instrument includes all these elements, this enables us to show which aspect(s) of citizens' attitudes towards political actors become more negative. Have citizens become more cynical about political actors' reliability or about their

competence? And if it is related to their competence, which aspects do they feel specifically cynical about?

In Chapter 2, 3 and 4 we have build on the three-item scale used in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies and added four new statements. Our new measurement instrument fulfills both criteria, but could be improved. With regard to the first criterion, we had seven items that each had a four point scale: completely agree, agree, disagree and completely disagree. With regard to the second criterion, both reliability and competence were included. Six of the seven elements were included, only general feelings of political actors' honesty were missing. We included what we thought was a stronger statement (political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion), but a large majority of the respondents agreed with this statement (see Appendix H). Even the statement the least respondents agreed upon (ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested), was still confirmed by half of the respondents. In future research we should find a few statements to which only a minority of the respondents answers in a cynical way. Also, it is important to include both positively and negatively formulated items in scale. The positively formulated items we have added are competence items and we would suggest adding positively formulated reliability items as well.

### **Measuring Ideological Voter Uncertainty and Volatility**

In addition to our remarks about the measurement of political cynicism, we would like to discuss voter uncertainty and volatility. In Chapter 3, we have argued that measurement instruments for voter uncertainty and volatility should included an ideological component. A citizen that hesitates and changes between ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties. In a measurement instrument, hesitating between two ideologically related parties should therefore be regarded as a smaller hesitation than hesitating between non-related parties and changing between two related parties should be regarded as a "smaller change" than changing between non-related parties. We used the ideological left-right position as a proxy for the ideological position. By including the left-right position of the parties someone hesitates or changes between, one can show the scope of the hesitation or change.

The left-right position is the most often used indicator for an ideological position, but we acknowledge that the left-right dimension is not the only relevant dimension. Recently, several scholars have argued that next to the economic left right dimension, a cultural dimension has become important for explaining voter preferences (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008;

Kriesi, et al., 2008; Pellikaan, et al., 2007; Pellikaan, et al., 2003; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). This cultural dimension entails a cosmopolitan multicultural view as opposed to a culture-protectionist one. Unfortunately our data did not enable us to include the cultural dimension in our measures of ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. Even without the inclusion of the cultural dimension, we think that the inclusion of the economic left-right position is good first step to improve the voter uncertainty and volatility measures. However, we think that future research should consider integrating both the economic and cultural dimension in a measurement instrument for ideological voter uncertainty and volatility.

### **A Multi-Methodological Research Design for Measuring the Effects of News Content**

We would also like to make a remark about the multi-methodological research design we have employed to measure the effects of news content on political cynicism and voter behavior. In Chapter 2, we used a content analysis and panel survey design to study the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism. We estimated to what extent people are exposed to strategic and substantive news content and what the effect on cynicism is. In Chapter 4, we used an experimental design to study the effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism as well as voter behavior. We exposed participants to different versions of the stimulus material (substantive / strategic / substantive and strategic / no stimulus material) and afterwards compared their level of political cynicism, turnout intention and voter uncertainty.

As we argued in the Introduction, the supplementary use of these methods leads to a more balanced assessment of media effects, because both methods have advantages as well as disadvantages. While an experimental design exactly measures short-term effects of forced exposure to a specific news item, a content analysis and panel survey design estimates longer-term effects of repeated exposure to a wide array of news content in news outlets that people select themselves. We saw that these two methods can lead to different results and tried to explain why the results differ. Future research should be conducted to find out the exact differences between the two methods.

### **Evaluating the Developments**

In the Introduction we have shown that political cynicism and distrust have grown in the Netherlands and many other countries. While cynicism has grown, voter behavior has changed a lot. More citizens hesitate which party to vote for and make a choice just before the elections. Consequently more citizens choose different parties in two successive elections.



One can wonder how worrying these developments really are. This thesis can yield some insights into the nature of political cynicism and voter behavior.

### **Evaluating Political Cynicism**

Should we be worried about the fact that about half of the respondents could be regarded as politically cynical? Is cynicism towards political actors a problem – or is a moderate level of cynicism a normal attitude and therefore inevitable? To answer these questions, we need some nuances. We need to know what cynicism means for citizens and whether specific parts of the electorate are cynical.

First, for the evaluation of political cynicism, it matters what it means for citizens. With regard to reliability, most citizens do not doubt political actors' honesty and integrity, and they are not afraid of corruption, but they think that political actors do not deliver what they promise and that they only care about their own interests. With regard to competence, most citizens do not think that politicians are incompetent and unable to fulfill their job, but they have the idea that politicians are not decisive in taking care of major problems and that they don't know what is important for the people. It could have been worse; citizens do not accuse politicians of the worst: a lack of integrity and total incompetence. Nevertheless, an image arises of an inward-looking political elite, which cares about its own interests, does not know what is important for ordinary people and does not fulfill promises. These feelings have been successfully exploited by populist parties in the past decades.

Some of the complaints are inherent to the political system of a consensus democracy, which we discuss in more detail later on in this Conclusion. In a system with coalition governments, even incumbent politicians cannot fulfill every promise, because they have to make compromises with other political parties in their coalition. Also, when confronted with a problem, they cannot quickly decide on a solution, because they have to negotiate with their partners. These system characteristics cannot easily be changed (and have advantages as well). In recent years, politicians in The Netherlands have put a lot of effort in showing the people they care about their interests, talking to them to get to know what is important for them. Unfortunately they have put little effort in explaining how the system works, what its advantages and disadvantages are, and that some side effects of the system are inevitable. At the same time, newly established parties gained votes just because they claim they care about the peoples' interests and they know what is important for them, like the LPF and the PVV in the Netherlands. Since these new parties position themselves as political outsiders and blame the establishment for neglecting the people, it is not very likely that they will restore peoples'

trust in political actors in general. Also, when these new parties take part in government, they also have to make compromises, which may disappoint their voters again.

Second, not all citizens can be fully satisfied, but when specific citizens are systematically underrepresented this may be a problem. A part of the cynical feelings can be explained by dissatisfaction with governmental policies, as we have shown in Chapter 1. Those with an “average” opinion are probably more often satisfied than those with a more deviant opinion. Leftist and rightist voters are more likely to be dissatisfied than voters in the political centre, since parties in the political centre are more often in government than leftist and rightist parties. Yet what if specific parts of the electorate systematically feel cynical and underrepresented? The consequence can be that these citizens decide not to participate in the democratic process anymore. If their opinions deviate systematically from other citizens’ opinions, the result can be that indeed they will be underrepresented in the democratic process. In the Netherlands, a large majority of the citizens turns out to vote in parliamentary elections. The high proportionality of the Dutch electoral system and the possibilities for new parties that follow from that may be a reason for this high turnout. We discuss the differences between proportional representation in consensus democracies and the disproportional election systems in majoritarian democracies in further detail later on.

Bovens & Wille (2009) referred in this respect to the importance of an educational gap in what they call “diploma democracy”. They argued that the Dutch political system is a meritocracy with a gap between self-confident well-educated citizens with access to political arenas and elites on the one hand and less educated citizens who feel disqualified and excluded from these arenas on the other hand. They speak of an “exclusion bias”: particular opinions are not represented and the lower educated endorse these opinions more often than the higher educated. Especially in the open consensus systems in most European democracies, this is often only a temporary misfit of representation. Recently, immigration restrictions and strong punishment belonged to the opinions that were underrepresented in the political arena (Bovens & Wille, 2009). Mostly higher educated political entrepreneurs have founded new parties all over Europe to fill this gap and represent opinions more popular among the lower educated, but certainly not absent among the higher educated. Yet, even when a representational gap is filled, a feeling of being underrepresented by the political elites can still remain.

More generally, when evaluating the level of political cynicism, we think it is relevant to keep in mind that cynicism interacts with other political attitudes, such as political interest and knowledge, which are also related to education. It is exactly a specific combination of

these attitudes that is potentially worrying. As argued in Chapter 3, political cynicism is not mutually exclusive with political interest. A politically cynical citizen can have a critical and constructive attitude towards political actors and have sufficient political knowledge, but a politically cynical citizen can also be tuned out of politics: disappointed, uninterested and without sufficient knowledge. In Chapter 3, we found that the effect of cynicism can be softened or strengthened by political interest and that the citizens most prone to voter uncertainty and volatility are both cynical and uninterested. In Chapter 4, we found that news content only induces cynicism among lower knowledgeable citizens. While news content had both favorable and unfavorable effects among the lower knowledgeable, it had only favorable effects among the higher knowledgeable.

We would like to argue that it is the combination of political cynicism, low involvement and low knowledge that is worrying. Cynical, uninterested and low knowledgeable citizens are most easily affected by news use and are also most prone to ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. This group indeed seems to be caught in a spiral of cynicism: they seem to have turned their back to politics. Given the combination of their political attitudes, it is very hard to reduce cynicism in this group. Moreover, citizens with negative attitudes can explain precisely why they are cynical; they mention more reasons than those with positive attitudes and were also more specific, as we showed in Chapter 1. When this negative attitude is combined with low knowledge, in other words when citizens know exactly why they distrust political actors without knowing much about politics, these citizens may not be easily convinced to change that negative attitude. Nevertheless, it is important to get this group involved in the political process. For this reason, we think that in future research, more attention should be paid to the combination of high cynicism, low interest and low knowledge.

### **Evaluating Voter Behavior**

Should we be worried about the growth of voter uncertainty and volatility or is it a sign that voters finally began to choose, as Rose & McAllister (1986) already argued almost 25 years ago? In majoritarian democracies two main parties play a dominant role and the differences between these two parties are large, while more political parties play a significant role in consensus democracies with multiparty systems. Therefore, parties in these countries are often ideologically close to at least one other party, but differ fundamentally from other parties. We have argued in Chapter 3 that a citizen who hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes

between two ideologically different parties. A citizen who hesitates between two ideologically related parties can have very clear ideas about his or her ideal party and vote according to a fairly stable ideological position. A citizen who hesitates between ideologically different parties will probably not have a clear view about what a party should be like and will probably not have a stable ideological position.

Uncertainty and volatility are related to the electoral system. The more proportional a system is, the more parties a citizen can choose between, and the higher the uncertainty and volatility can potentially be. Whereas voter uncertainty leads to volatility in consensus democracies, it may lead to abstention in majoritarian democracies, where a relevant alternative party choice is not available (we pay more attention to political systems later on in this Conclusion). In this light, voter volatility is a favorable development: it is a sign that citizens decide consciously. In Chapter 4 we found that substantive news induces uncertainty among the higher knowledgeable. This finding yields support for the idea that voter uncertainty and volatility are a sign that citizens make a conscious choice. However, ideological voter uncertainty and volatility are probably not caused by substantive information and could not be interpreted as a sign that citizens choose consciously.

Aggregate level electoral volatility as well as individual level voter uncertainty and volatility are very high in the Netherlands. The proportional representation system with an electoral threshold of one seat (which is .67 percent of the votes) offers small parties a place in parliament. When citizens hesitate and change between ideologically related parties, this does not necessarily point out a problem regarding their political involvement. However, when small individual level changes lead to larger aggregate level changes, this can lead to system instability. The chance that this happens is larger when citizens change between ideologically different parties. Yet even when citizens change between ideologically related parties, this can have large consequences. When citizens move to the outer sides of the political spectrum and the political centre becomes smaller, it is hard to form a stable coalition government. Also, frequently changing parties in government can erode the stability of governmental policies in consensus democracies.

As shown in the Introduction, most citizens do not hesitate and change between parties with strongly different ideologies. A majority votes for the same party or a comparable party and only a small minority switches between the left and the right block. Although ties to individual parties have definitely weakened, ties to the broader ideological identities of the left and right blocks are still strong (Adriaansen, et al., 2005; Gallagher, et al., 2005). Although voter behavior is more uncertain and volatile, most citizens are not “adrift”.

Nevertheless, there is a group that hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties and we should be worried about this, especially if this group would be growing. As shown in Chapter 3, political cynicism induces ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, while political interest reduces it. Consequently, those who combine low interest with high cynicism are most likely to hesitate and change between ideologically different parties. While cynicism and interest do not directly affect actual turnout, they do affect turnout intention. Although these cynical and low interested citizens choose to change between different parties now, they may choose to abstain from voting in the future. In the Introduction we have seen younger citizens are less inclined to vote. This might be temporary; they might be more inclined to vote ones they get older. For the younger cynical and low interested citizens it is very well possible that it is not a temporary phenomenon however. This is another reason to focus on this group in future research.

### **Favorable and Unfavorable Effects of News Content**

Previous research on the effects of media content on political trust and cynicism has primarily focused on unfavorable effects of specific content, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative or uncivil coverage (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996) and strategic coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). The media malaise and spiral of cynicism theories start from a pessimistic viewpoint blaming the media for inducing political apathy. Starting from a rather neutral perspective, we have tried to distinguish between unfavorable and favorable effects of news use. In our studies we have shown that although unfavorable effects of strategic news on cynicism are visible under specific circumstances, the news media have favorable effects as well. All these effects are likely to be conditional rather than universal, which is in line with extant research (McLeod, et al., 2009). Thus, the media have both favorable and unfavorable effects, but these effects are not identical for everybody and in each situation.

Focusing on political cynicism in our longer-term study combining a content analysis with a panel survey, we found no effects of strategic news content, but we found favorable effects of substantive news content. In our short-term experimental study we found that while strategic news content unfavorably affected cynicism among the lower knowledgeable, the combination of strategic and substantive news content favorably affected cynicism among the higher knowledgeable. The combined results of both studies suggest that there is no need to be worried about the effects of strategic news on cynicism, 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. In other words, news about substantive differences of opinion between political actors does not lead to cynicism and neither does news about their strategies for pursuing their goals as long as it is about strategies for pursuing substantive issues.

With regard to political behavior, we found only neutral and favorable effects of exposure to strategic and substantive news content. In Chapter 4, we found that all news content had a favorable effect on turnout intention. This means that exposure to any political content induces turnout intention. Furthermore, substantive news induces voter uncertainty among the higher knowledgeable. Although voter uncertainty is not necessarily favorable or unfavorable, the most plausible interpretation is that substantive news makes the high knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between political parties.

In summary, all news induces turnout among younger citizens. Also, on the longer-term, substantive news reduces cynicism among younger citizens. This suggests that by explaining what politics is about, substantive news makes younger citizens more positive about politics and more inclined to vote. In this way exposure to substantive news may reverse the “spiral of cynicism”. Younger citizens who are less experienced than older ones are more dependent on journalists’ interpretations. Information about political actors’ viewpoints and actions, interpreted by journalists in a substantive manner can invoke positive attitudes towards political actors, because it helps citizens understand the political process. However, a precondition is that citizens are willing to be exposed to substantive news, a topic we discuss later on.

### **Majoritarian Democracies and Consensus Democracies**

For the interpretation of the results of our studies, it is important to be aware of the differences in the balance of powers in majoritarian and consensus democracies. Due to these differences, the nature and consequences of political cynicism might not be the same in the two systems. In this section, we discuss these potential differences and suggest some possibilities for future research. Let us first shortly define the two political systems. *Majoritarian or Westminster systems* are characterized by the concentration of governmental power in one-party and bare majority cabinets, cabinet dominance, two-party systems, majoritarian and disproportional election systems and interest group pluralism. *Consensus systems* are characterized by executive power sharing in coalition cabinets, executive-legislative balance of power, multiparty systems, proportional representation and interest group corporatism and compromises (Lijphart, 1984, 1999).

Lijphart (1999) showed that satisfaction with democracy, turnout and ideological government-voter proximity are all higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. Some authors have therefore suggested to introduce proportional representation as a way to cure low levels of trust (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Wattenberg, 2007). The question is what causes what, especially with regard to trust-related measures. It is possible that the consensus system induces trust. Levels of political cynicism or distrust are lower in consensus systems (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Banducci, et al., 1999; Lijphart, 1999; Van der Meer, 2009), and after the transition from majoritarianism to proportionality in New Zealand scholars reported an increase of political trust (Banducci, et al., 1999), though this is only one case. Possibly, the relationship is reciprocal: specific system characteristics might not only induce trust, but trust might also be a precondition for the development of these characteristics (Lijphart, 1999). Our aim is not to give a definite answer to the direction of causality between systems and trust, but we think we should acknowledge the differences when interpreting our results.

For comparing cynicism or distrust in majoritarian and consensus democracies, we think it would be interesting to distinguish between several aspects of cynicism. We have no a priori reason to expect that either cynicism towards political actors' reliability or cynicism towards political actors' competence is higher in one of these systems. We argue however, that some elements of cynicism might be stronger in consensus democracies, while others might be stronger in majoritarian democracies. On the one hand, in consensus democracies political actors have to make compromises, because they take part in coalition governments. This makes it harder to assign responsibility for policy choices than in majoritarian democracies. Therefore, we expect that cynicism towards political actors' promises and their ability to take charge of problems is higher in consensus democracies. On the other hand, in the open electoral systems of consensus democracies, more different voices are represented than in majoritarian democracies. For this reason we expect that cynicism towards political actors' responsiveness to citizens and their problem awareness is higher in majoritarian democracies. For the other elements of cynicism (towards political actors' general honesty, their motives and their general competence), we have no reason to expect it to be higher in one of the two systems.

Since cynicism is lower in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies, one can ask whether the elements most vulnerable in majoritarian democracies have a larger effect on the total level of cynicism than other elements. Equally, one could wonder whether the differences between the two systems are stable in time. To be able to answer these and

related questions, we think that it would be highly interesting to compare the differences between the two systems in future research. Also, when we are aware of what cynicism or distrust is all about, it is easier to interpret it and to find ways to decrease it.

Not only may the nature of cynicism differ in majoritarian and consensus democracies, its consequences might be different too. In Chapter 3, we found effects of cynicism on voter uncertainty and volatility as well as on turnout intention. We found no effects on actual turnout, which is in line with others studies in consensus democracies. De Vreese & Semetko (2002) and Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, & Oegema (2006) also agreed on the absence of a short-term effect, while the latter found a longer-term effect of cynicism on turnout. Although studies in majoritarian democracies contradict each other, part of them found short-term decreasing effects of cynicism on turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Those majoritarian studies that did not find any effects of cynicism on turnout, found that cynicism affected support for third-party alternatives (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005) or challenger candidates and parties (Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). This suggests that in the absence of a relevant alternative, cynicism reduces turnout. When there is a relevant alternative, which is always the case in consensus democracies and sometimes in majoritarian democracies, cynicism does not reduce turnout, but leads to an alternative party choice. In other words: cynical citizens who want to voice their grievances can either switch to another party or abstain from voting. The number of parties available is much higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies. Citizens are therefore probably more likely to switch to another party in consensus democracies and to abstain from voting in majoritarian democracies.

The question is whether the alternative party or parties available are acceptable to citizens. First, it can be dependent on the ideological differences between the citizen and the available parties. This would imply that, when the available alternatives differ too much with their preferences, they are more likely to abstain, while when there is an alternative available that is in line with their preferences, they are more likely to be volatile. Additionally, citizens prefer an alternative party with good chances of government participation (Tillie, 1995). While in majoritarian democracies only two parties have a chance to be in government, in consensus democracies many parties do. Second, it can also be dependent on the availability of parties from outside the political establishment. This would imply that when anti-establishment parties are not available, citizens are more likely to abstain, whereas when these parties are available, citizens are more likely to be volatile. A third option is a combination of both: some citizens prefer an ideologically related party, whereas others prefer an anti-



establishment party. Both ideological related parties and protest parties are available in consensus democracies, while they are not often available in majoritarian democracies. This can explain why cynicism reduces turnout in majoritarian systems, whereas it induces volatility in consensus systems.

### **Media Effects among Younger Citizens**

Young adults are experiencing their first electoral cycles. They recently got the right to vote, are exposed to political information they are not familiar with and start to attach meaning to it. These young citizens acquire information from their family, friends, schoolmates and colleagues, but also from the media. Because voting is relatively new for younger citizens, they have not developed stable attitudes towards political actors yet and new experiences can affect these attitudes. The media can therefore have relatively large effects among this group (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Jennings & Niemi, 1978; McLeod & Shah, 2009). The less stable a person's attitudes are, the more likely it is that this person will be influenced by information from the news media. In line with this argument, we found that media effects are stronger among younger citizens and we think this has consequences for future research as well as for society.

### **Younger Citizens: the Future of Social Scientific Research?**

We advise three strategies for future research. First, it would be fruitful to focus on younger citizens in media effects research. Mapping media effects in a survey is extremely difficult, because the effects of media content are often small, since citizens are affected by so many other variables. For this reason, it is attractive to focus on a group of citizens whose attitudes are relatively easily affected. The strongest media effects will most likely be visible among young adults, who can vote for the first or second time in their life and are starting to think about politics. Such studies can also include moderating factors and in this way yield a more detailed understanding of which young citizens are most easily affected.

Second, we suggest comparing young and non-young citizens more often. With regard to the independent variable, such studies can reveal which media outlets and media content more easily affect younger citizens, and which might not. With regard to the dependent variable, such studies can yield a better understanding which attitudes (and behavior) are more easily affected among younger citizens. It is possible that cynicism is most easily affected among the young, while other attitudes are more easily affected among older citizens

or equally affected among both young and non-young citizens. Additionally, the question can be until which age group younger citizens are more easily affected.

Third, we saw that young citizens' political cynicism is both lower than that of other citizens (in the Introduction) and also more easily affected by news use (in Chapter 2). An interesting question for future research is whether the results are the same for cynicism towards reliability and for cynicism towards competence. Are the differences between young and non-young citizens the same for reliability and competence? Are both reliability and competence equally affected by news use among younger citizens? News that explains which issues are addressed by political actors, instead of their strategic motivations, may remind younger citizens of the public interest political actors pursue and thus reduce cynicism towards their reliability. Similarly, news coverage about political actors' policy actions, instead of their strategic achievements, can reduce cynicism towards their competence. Which elements of cynicism are affected by substantive news is also an interesting question for future research.

### **Younger Citizens: the Future of Society?**

Our results do not only have consequences for social scientific research, but also have broader societal implications. The favorable effect of substantive news in Chapter 2 was only visible among younger citizens. This means that if younger citizens are confronted with information, they start to understand what politics is about, why political actors act in a specific way and this makes them feel more positive about political actors. Exposure to substantive news can lead to a virtuous circle in this way. The other way around, it is also possible that a lack of exposure to substantive news limits young citizens' understanding of politics and trust in political actors, and may then lead to a spiral of cynicism. The question is to what extent it is possible to confront young citizens with substantive political news or other substantive political information.

One can improve civic education at school, by exposing teenagers to more political information at school. The more political knowledge one has, the more s/he is able to interpret political news. Apart from knowledge about how the political system works, citizens should acquire media literacy. For many citizens it is hard to interpret what they see or hear in the media, while they should be able to critically pose questions about it and judge the credibility of news sources. Although improving both civic education and media literacy can only have favorable effects on political attitudes and behavior, this is only a solution for the generation that is still in school. Moreover, the knowledge acquired at school should also be maintained

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afterwards and civic education will have the largest effects on those who are receptive to being educated (Wattenberg, 2007). Improving civic education is therefore a good but nevertheless insufficient solution.

A few decades ago, citizens were confronted with political information as a side effect of television use, in the Netherlands and in many other countries. During an evening of watching their favorite shows, citizens were confronted with political news. With only a few public broadcasting networks available on television, citizens had no choice. In today's competitive and fragmented media market, citizens have many choices. Esser et al. (2010) compared 13 European broadcasting systems and showed that the absolute amount of political information available is larger than ever before. At the same time, De Beus, Brants, & Van Praag (2009) showed that the relative amount of political information on television has decreased in the Netherlands and we have no reason to expect different results in other countries. Public broadcasting networks have to compete with commercial networks and most of the latter do not broadcast political information at all. Commercial networks are also most popular among the lower politically interested. Television's ability to disseminate political information to non-interested citizens (called a "trap effect" by Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002, 2004) has therefore disappeared. It is much easier to watch television without being confronted with political information. The same holds true for the internet, where citizens can find unlimited political information, but only if they are looking for it. In other words: citizens can now consume political information all day, but they can also avoid it entirely.

The fact that consuming political information has become a conscious choice can lead to a growing gap between highly interested and knowledgeable citizens on the one hand and low interested citizens consuming little political information and lacking political knowledge on the other hand (De Beus, et al., 2009; Prior, 2007). When citizens with a low level of political knowledge consume little political information, this little information may have large effects on their level of political cynicism and on their voter behavior, either favorable or unfavorable. For this reason it matters a lot which information they consume – substantive, strategic or both.

In the Introduction, we contrasted an optimistic modernist perspective on voter behavior with a pessimistic social capital perspective. The optimistic modernist perspective seems to apply to the highly interested and knowledgeable citizens, while the pessimistic social capital perspective applies to the low interested citizens lacking political knowledge. Younger citizens seem to be overrepresented in the second group. Although they use the internet for news gathering as often as older citizens, they use less offline media with high

levels of political information, such as public broadcasting channels and quality newspapers. Consequently, they consume less news overall than older citizens (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2010; Wattenberg, 2007). Unfortunately, the internet does not reach citizens that are not already reached by offline sources: almost everyone who uses online sources for gathering information uses offline sources as well. This means that younger citizens who use the internet for news gathering are already politically interested and use offline political information sources as well. The internet will therefore not be a fruitful way to expose young and low interested citizens to political news.

The free newspapers may be a better way to expose this group to political news. Data of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) in 2006 reveal that 54 percent of the 18–25 year-olds read free newspapers *Sp!ts* or *Metro* on a daily base, while in the rest of the population this was only 11 percent. Free newspapers include a reasonable amount of news about politics and may therefore be a channel to reach young and lower politically knowledgeable citizens.

A large majority of the Dutch electorate still gathers news on a daily base (Adriaansen & Van Praag, 2010; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2010). There is an advantageous opportunity structure for informed citizenship in the Netherlands: the amount of programs containing political information is high and scheduled in a way that enables citizens to watch these programs at any moment of the day (Esser, et al., 2010). Yet the fact that age is negatively related to news exposure is a reason to be concerned. The question is whether young citizens will consume more political information once they get older, or in other words whether it is an age effect. Several authors showed these generations differ from older generations, that they will most likely not be willing to catch up once they get older and it is therefore probably a cohort effect (Lauf, 2001; Peiser, 2000; Wattenberg, 2007). These authors focus on television and regular newspapers and the picture may be different after including the internet and free newspapers. The fact that a part of the younger generation may not be reached with “old” outlets is an extra reason to find out whether they can be reached with other outlets.

### **In Summary**

This dissertation suggests that overall there is little need to worry about the consequences of news media use for political cynicism and voter behavior. The nature of the news has changed: strategic news has gained prominence, partly at the expense of substantive news, but the latter has by no means disappeared. Strategic news content can have unfavorable consequences, but not if it is alternated with substantive news content, which is

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the case. As long as media combine strategic items with substantive items, strategic news does not lead to cynicism across the board.

Nevertheless, there is a segment in the population we should be worried about: young citizens with low political knowledge and interest. We found favorable effects of news exposure for this group, but it was the only group for which we found unfavorable effects as well. For the current young generation it is much easier than for earlier generations to almost avoid political news. The little news young low interested citizens consume can therefore have a large effect on how they think about politics and on their behavior. The challenge for political actors is how to confront these younger citizens with political substantive information. It is necessary to do this however, because with a lack of political information this group can well be caught into a spiral of cynicism.