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Dynamics of political information transmission: How media coverage informs public judgments about politics

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Introduction

The notion that political information matters has long been considered conventional wisdom in the social and behavioral sciences, inspiring generations of scholars in political science, political communication, and political psychology to study the causes and consequences of variance in political information among citizens in democracies. “There is little disagreement,” writes Delli Carpini (2009), “that the quality of public opinion and civic participation, and thus of the democratic process, is affected by the extent to which citizens are informed about politics” (p. 23). To use Delli Carpini and Keeter’s (1996, p. 8) famous analogy, “[p]olitical information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship.”

Indeed, informed citizens are not just better citizens in that they are more likely to behave in ways that reflect good citizenship, they also behave more competently as political participants in that they are more likely to “discern their real interests and take effective advantage of the civic opportunities afforded them” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 3). To be sure, some scholars have suggested that citizens need not always be informed in order to perform their civic tasks reasonably well (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991) or in order for the collective voice of the people to speak “rationally” (Page & Shapiro, 1992). Increasingly, however, the tenability of such alternative views has been called into serious question (Althaus, 2003; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Prior, 2007), and what is more, even those alternative views do not explicitly discard the normative ideal of an informed citizenry. Accordingly, as Kuklinski and his colleagues (2000) note, “the normative thrust in public opinion research has been unwavering: citizens should be factually informed” (Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, p. 791).

And yet, there is a paradox in the study of political information. “On the one hand,” notes Druckman in a pointed but little noticed essay (2005, p. 515), “scholars have made notable strides in identifying the sources of variance in political information.” On the other hand, he writes, the consequences of acquiring political information are not nearly as obvious

as many scholars in this area of research like to assume. Fittingly, Druckman phrased the title of his essay as a question: “Does Political Information Matter?” Indeed, much is still uncertain about the role of political information in modern democracies, particularly regarding its role as an *agent of change*. The common wisdom that “political information matters” implies a dynamic, namely that the effect of *acquiring* information translates into actual *change* in opinions and behavior. It also implies, albeit indirectly, that the *transmission* of political facts matters: citizens can acquire and apply the facts only if the media and other sources of political information disseminate them (Althaus et al., 2011; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kuklinski et al., 2000). In sum, researchers of political information study the sources of such information because the facts transmitted by these sources should, once acquired by citizens, change how citizens reason and behave. In reality, as we shall see, there is remarkably little evidence available that entirely substantiates this claim, at least regarding the influence of facts to inform citizens’ political judgments and preferences. Moreover, this scant evidence has originated almost entirely from studies of American politics, and so questions remain about the generalizability of these findings to other political environments.

This dissertation is concerned with the role of political information transmission as an agent of change in citizens’ opinions about the European Union (EU). As I will argue in the following chapter, there is especially good reason to remain skeptical about the power of political information to alter preexisting political judgments when the judgments at hand concern a supranational political entity such as the EU. And yet, I will also argue that certain types of factual information, under some conditions, can indeed influence such judgments to a reasonably modest but substantively significant degree. This dissertation, then, does not just speak to Druckman’s (2005) question of whether political information matters, but also addresses such important but unsettled questions as *what kinds* of political information matter, *when* or *among whom* this information matters, and *how much* it actually matters. These are questions that do not specifically pertain to European politics and democracy, but address concerns in political communication scholarship more generally. Accordingly, the aim and scope of most studies presented in this dissertation is not merely confined to addressing the dynamics of the relationship between political information transmission and public opinion *about* the EU. Instead, I chiefly utilize the European case as a context for research that aims to contribute in fields of research dominated by studies of American politics (see Bullock, 2011).

I introduce this dissertation in greater detail below. I sketch the theoretical foundations of the research that structures this dissertation into four empirical chapters. I also outline the design of this research and summarize the different data sources that it draws on.

Dynamics of Political Information Transmission

Information Acquisition and Change in Political Judgments

So why care about variance in political information?¹ This basic question represents the starting point for the research described in this dissertation. Even though it is hard to deny that acquiring political information is normatively desirable (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 22-61), it is ultimately an empirical question as to whether citizens actually *use* what they learn about the political world to inform their political judgments and preferences. The underlying assumption of most prior political information research is that acquiring information indeed has important consequences, yet only very few studies have captured this dynamic in a comprehensive analysis of *change*. Instead, most studies document evidence of information effects on the basis of cross-sectional data, thereby systematically overstating these effects (see Bartels, 2006; Levendusky, 2011). In short, even if the notion that political information matters is ingrained in the literature, it is still very much an open question whether, and how much, citizens' preexisting political judgments are actually affected by an intake of new and factual information.

Following Bartels (2006) and Levendusky (2011), I will argue in *Chapter 1* that more accurate estimates of political information effects are, especially in the short run, bound to be quite modest in magnitude – if they are to be observed at all – once we account for the relative stability of individual political opinions. And when we do, it also becomes clear that political information is unlikely to produce any change unless the information received is sufficiently distinctive. This is something that most previous studies have failed to take into account: that some kinds of information are more distinctive – and hence, more consequential – than others (see Druckman, 2005). Scholars primarily rely on measures of general political information to study effects of factual information, but as Gilens (2001) has observed, the problem with such measures is that they tap facts about politics that are unlikely to be directly

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “political information” to describe *factual* political information; that is, objective data about politics (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). The range of factual information stored in long-term memory is commonly referred to as “political knowledge” (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 10-12). To describe the acquisition of factual political information, I sometimes use the term “political learning.”

relevant to specific political judgments. Thus, if change is indeed present, then general political information may not capture it. In order to adequately ascertain the change in opinion that results from political information acquisition, I will draw on a unique set of information reception measures that were specifically designed to hold a clear theoretical relationship with the political judgments under study. In sum, I relate opinion change to opinion-relevant information acquisition, and this strategy avoids the notable pitfalls of estimating information effects that have hampered much previous work.

Media Coverage and Information Acquisition

If, as I will hypothesize in *Chapter 1*, citizens indeed use what they learn to inform associated political judgments; that is, if opinion-relevant information is consequential, then we are on more solid ground to argue that we should indeed care a great deal about inequality in these kinds of political information (Druckman, 2005). Of course, citizens can inform their opinions only to the extent that they have the opportunity to acquire the relevant facts. The concept of opportunity manifests itself through the *availability* of political information (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This directs immediate attention to the media. For most citizens, the media are centrally important sources of political information. Most citizens, then, are bound to learn little unless the information of interest is actually available in the media. Thus, for the media “to transfer a particular piece of information, it must actually include it in its content” (Druckman, 2005, p. 517). However, in most prior studies of the media’s impact on political information, the availability of political information is often not just merely assumed, but also assumed to be constant. I will argue that this assumption is unlikely to hold in many cases: both within and across media environments, the supply of political information, and hence the opportunity to acquire it, is bound to *vary*.

In *Chapter 2*, I go beyond much of the prior political learning literature to consider the role of media choice in affecting individual learning opportunities, and hence, learning itself (Prior, 2005). As the proliferation of media sources and diversification of media content in recent decades have broken the traditional mass news audience into smaller segments (Baum, 2003; Hamilton, 2004; Prior, 2007), the probability of encountering and acquiring certain kinds of political information should vary considerably among individual citizens, depending on the specific media sources that citizens choose to rely on. To test this hypothesis, I analyze the media environment – and the available information in it – at the level of the individual.²

² According to Prior’s (2007) definition, a media environment comprises “the different media sources routinely available to people at any point in time” (p. 28). I define the *individual* media environment as the range of media

Such an analysis requires knowing which media sources carry the relevant information as well as knowing which media sources an individual regularly consults. As Druckman (2005) notes, this “entails content analyses of media outlets and media specific measures of exposure” (p. 517). The study described in *Chapter 2* is among the first to incorporate both media content and media reliance data into one comprehensive analysis of political information acquisition (see also Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013).

While it is often sensible to presume that citizens’ media choices produce considerable variation in learning opportunity, this presumption may not hold under all circumstances. The media choices that people make ought to be particularly consequential insofar as the diffusion of political information across the collectively shared media environment remains restricted to a narrow range of media sources. However, when the level of information saturation is high, such that the relevant information diffuses across a wide range of available sources, people should have a greater likelihood of encountering and absorbing the information, irrespective of divergences in media reliance (Barabas & Jerit, 2009). This is the proposition that I will test in *Chapter 3*. Even though the notion that citizens learn more easily in information-rich media environments has long been established (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1994; Zukin & Snyder, 1984), studies that analyze how the “breadth” of opportunity (Barabas & Jerit, 2009) impacts on political learning in high-choice media settings have rarely been conducted. The research presented in *Chapter 3* draws on a rich body of survey and media content analytic data spanning four European countries to examine how the level of cross-media diffusion of a large series of political facts corresponds with the individual reception of these facts. The outcomes of this research provide an important insight into how important the high-choice media environment *as a whole* remains to be in informing those who reside in it.

Conditional Learning, Conditional Change

While different media environments provide citizens with different opportunities to access and acquire and apply political information, scholars have long argued that some of citizens’ own individual characteristics condition the effects of information transmission. Two of the most prominent individual factors that affect citizens’ receptivity to new information are *motivation* and *ability*. Motivation reflects the willingness or desire to learn about ongoing events in politics, and ability the cognitive capacity to adequately process and comprehend the

sources that are routinely available to, and accessed by, each citizen individually. The individual-level media environment is distinct from the macro-level “collective media environment,” which, in line with Prior’s (2007) definition, includes all media sources routinely available to citizens beyond those that citizens routinely rely on.

political information one receives (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990). In the study of political information gaps, the emergence of such gaps following increases in information availability has traditionally been attributed primarily to differences in ability (e.g., Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006) rather than motivation. And yet, if motivation “affects the extent to which individuals seek out information and how much attention they pay to that which comes their way” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 179), then differences in motivation should matter significantly. Indeed, in light of the dramatic growth of media choice in recent decades, it is only sensible to expect citizens’ motivational interests to moderate the impact of information transmission.³ “In a high-choice environment,” writes Prior (2005), “lack of motivation, not lack of skills or resources, poses the main obstacle to a widely informed electorate” (p. 577).

In this dissertation, I test the proposition that information availability and motivation – or, put differently, information supply and demand – *jointly* affect the probability that people learn about politics. This proposition builds on Prior’s (2007) Conditional Political Learning model (pp. 31-34), which, unlike earlier models of political learning, explicitly posits that the media environment (i.e., opportunity) and motivation interact to produce political information gaps. In testing this proposition, I refine this model analytically by incorporating the variation in information availability that previous opportunity-based models, including Prior’s, presume but not actually measure. I also put forward a proposition that is more advanced theoretically. In brief, I will argue that while opportunity and motivation should interact, they should do so mainly under conditions of *limited* information availability. According to what I will call the saturation-conditional motivation moderation hypothesis, better motivated citizens do initially benefit disproportionately from the availability of political information, yet motivation-based discrepancies in learning disappear when relevant media coverage becomes more prevalent. This is the hypothesis that I will test partially in *Chapter 2* and comprehensively in *Chapter 3*.

Cognitive ability may be less important than motivation in affecting the likelihood that people learn when they have the opportunity to do so, the reverse is a lot more plausible when it comes to *knowing* what the acquired information is about and what it is worth. “How well citizens are able to discern and articulate their interests depends not only on the immediate information environment..., but also on their ability to put this new information into a broader

³ The language of the knowledge gap literature suggests that individual characteristics (e.g., cognitive ability) are direct “causes” of political learning and that communication (e.g., information transmission) moderates the impact of these causes. “In reality,” Liu and Eveland (2005) point out, “the reverse is theoretically much more plausible:” individual characteristics “influence the degree to which communication variables have influence” (p. 911). The language of moderation I adopt here corresponds with the latter, communication-as-cause, perspective.

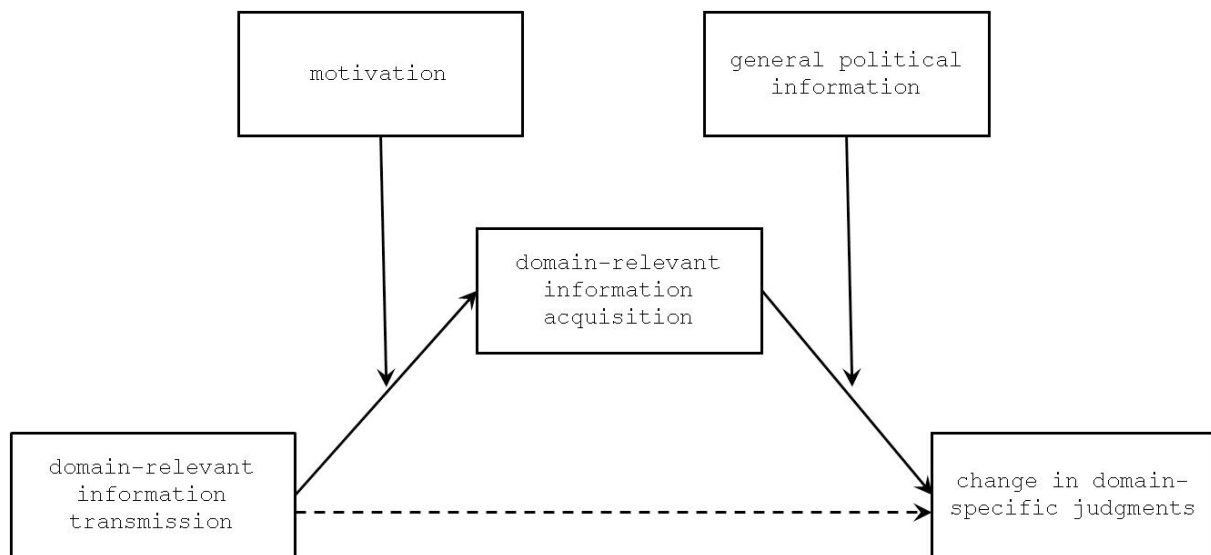
personal and political perspective.” Often, this implies that, for new information “to be *useful*, a citizen must bring additional information” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. x, emphasis added). In *Chapter 1*, I investigate if, and if so how, an individual’s store of general political information (and the cognitive capacity it reflects to process and integrate new information) moderates the change in political judgments that results from acquisition of new and relevant information. Even though scholars agree that general political information is a key regulator of opinion change (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992), the question of *how* it does so – and accordingly, *who* are most inclined to update opinions – remains unsettled (see Gilens, 2001, pp. 387-388).

Media Coverage and Conditional Informed Change

I dedicate a significant part of this dissertation to analyzing the availability of political information within and across media environments and its transmission from media sources to citizens. Ultimately, however, providing political information does not merely grant citizens the opportunity to learn, but also the opportunity to inform their political views. To do so, citizens must not only have access to relevant factual information and absorb what they need to know, but also *use* the acquired facts to update opinions accordingly. Whether citizens in fact “respond as the dominant strain of normative theory prescribes” (Kuklinski et al., 2000, p. 792), and make “informed updates” of political judgments when relevant facts are available to them in a real-world media environment, remains unclear. In part, this is because, as Druckman (2005) writes, “most of the research on political information acquisition... treats information itself as the ultimate dependent variable” (p. 517). And in part, it is because the scarce experiment-based evidence available is inconclusive about the actual power of political information transmission to alter preexisting judgments (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Kuklinski et al., 2000).

This dissertation is among the first to explore the relationships among media exposure, political learning, and updating of political judgments in real-world political and media environments (Barabas & Jerit, 2010), and to explore, in addition, how these relationships are conditioned by motivation and ability; individual characteristics that are critical to processing new information about politics. In *Chapter 4*, I integrate the main arguments developed in the preceding chapters of the dissertation to offer an inclusive theoretical account of information-

Figure 0.1 The impact of information transmission on judgments about politics: a conceptual model of Conditional Informed Change.



based change as a *conditional process*. If, as I argue in *Chapters 2* and *3*, the transmission of political information allows citizens to acquire that information, and if, as I argue in *Chapter 1*, information acquisition in turn allows citizens to inform related political judgments, then exposure to political facts in the media should, indirectly, translate into informed opinion change. If, moreover, personal factors moderate the probability that citizens learn and update, then the role of the media in informing public judgments about politics can be characterized as both indirect and conditional. The study presented in *Chapter 4* provides a formal test of the hypothesis that media exposure conditionally alters political judgments through inducing relevant factual information. The conceptual model that captures this process – and the model to be tested in *Chapter 4* – is a model of Conditional Informed Change, shown in Figure 0.1.

Research Design

In this dissertation, I use the Conditional Informed Change model to explain over-time changes in citizens' judgments about political performance in particular. The performance of political elites may manifest itself through the policies they produce, their effectiveness in governing, and the government practices they uphold (Rohrschneider, 2002). In judging elite performance, citizens thus evaluate political elites' actions – as well as the perceived conse-

quences of these actions – so as to “convey to policymakers whether they like what they see” (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007, p. 958). “Given that one of the central responsibilities of citizens in a representative democracy is to select and periodically reevaluate leaders,” Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, p. 65) note, “citizens also need specific information about these leaders.” Indeed, to accurately “see” what their political leaders “do” and reevaluate their approval if need be, citizens need performance-relevant information. In theory, such information thus specifically enables citizens to “provide a credible check on the behavior of officeholders” (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 55) and to reward or punish them for their actions. Accordingly, I study the dynamics of a type of political information that is normatively desirable and, according to my model, behaviorally consequential (Druckman, 2005). In most chapters of this dissertation, I examine the individual-level acquisition and/or appliance of information relevant to judging performance. As mentioned, the politics of the EU provides the context for my investigation (for an example of a study on the relationship between political information and performance judgments in U.S. politics, see Gaines et al., 2007).

To test the hypotheses I derive from the Conditional Informed Change model, I draw on a variety of data sources, including a two-wave panel survey, a rolling cross-sectional survey, and a series of media content analyses.⁴ Using these data, I can advance prior research in two methodological ways. Most studies that address the relationship between information transmission and learning do so without measuring or analytically integrating media coverage (Barabas & Jerit, 2009). The few studies that speak to the relationship between information and opinion updating, meanwhile, mostly report evidence from experiments in which both the presentation and people’s reception of the information are almost inevitably artificial (Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Kinder, 2007). My own approach to analyzing the effects of media coverage is relatively novel in that I incorporate actual information supply variables into my analyses *and* observe how people receive and respond to new information about real-world political affairs under circumstances that are naturally occurring and therefore entirely realistic.

Two-Wave Panel Survey

In this dissertation, I am particularly interested in the *dynamics* of the relationship between political information transmission and change in political judgments implied by the Conditional Informed Change model. Analyzing such dynamics in real-world political and

⁴ All works presented in this dissertation were supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (grant number 453-07-002).

media environments requires a dynamic survey design with which the same individuals can be observed at multiple points in time, so that any *change* in political judgments can be attributed to the impact of intervening events – say, a rapid increase in availability of judgment-relevant information. Panel surveys incorporate this design. Because panel surveys allow researchers to compare differences within individuals over time, they can offer more direct and, therefore, more convincing evidence of causal priority and change than (rolling) cross-sectional surveys, which only allow for comparing different individuals at a single point in time. As analyses of panel data can incorporate prior opinions, doing so will, given the typically high stability of opinions, significantly enhance the accuracy of the estimated effects of interventions. “Thus, even if our real interest is in the causes of short-term opinion *change* rather than in opinion *stability*, panel data will greatly facilitate our ability to isolate the effects of specific... events or processes” (Bartels, 2006, p. 143). A key virtue of using panel data for studying the effects of political information, then, is that it provides crucial perspective on how important the role of new information, transmitted or acquired, turns out to be in shaping the public’s political judgments in light of the stability of those judgments. “The panel strategy,” notes Levendusky (2011, p. 54), “moves scholars to the counterfactual of interest, [namely] how changes in information translate into changes in behavior.”

The studies presented in *Chapters 1, 2, and 4* of this dissertation draw on data from a two-wave panel survey ($n = 1,127$) collected in the Netherlands about two weeks before and directly after a real-world event in European politics: the EU summit (formally: European Council meeting) in Brussels of December 11 and 12, 2008. EU summits are routine but central events in European politics that address and resolve major outstanding EU-level issues, and therefore precisely the sort of political event that ought to inform the public about political decision-making and other key manifestations of elite performance at the level of the EU (see *Chapter 1* for additional details about the December 2008 summit). The panel survey was administered by TNS-NIPO. The sample of respondents who participated in the survey is generally representative of the Dutch adult population (see *Chapter 1* for details about survey procedures and the composition of the sample). I study the same individuals over time as they naturally encountered (or missed or avoided) coverage of the summit and its outcomes in the media; coverage containing new facts about EU performance. I use the survey to measure if respondents acquired these facts. I also gauge the specific media sources they routinely refer to, and, in both waves, their opinions about performance, among other variables (see *Chapters 1, 2, and 4* for important details about the survey design). In conjunction with media content data (see below), the panel data allow me to analyze the linkages between media choice and

information transmission, information transmission and acquisition (*Chapter 2*), information acquisition and opinion change (*Chapter 1*), and finally, between information transmission and opinion change (*Chapter 4*).

Rolling Cross-Sectional Survey

The two-wave panel survey data enable me to link up the various components of the Conditional Informed Change model, but as far as the supply side of political information is concerned, my panel analyses of political learning are necessarily restricted to the individual level as I hold the larger media environment constant. To test my hypotheses about the effects of opportunity and motivation across *collective* media environments, I draw on extensive data from a separate, rolling cross-sectional, survey. In a rolling cross-sectional (RCS) design, a one-shot cross-section is partitioned into random subsamples of respondents for each day of interviewing and released accordingly (Brady & Johnston, 2006). The flexibility of the design allows me to collect a large series of data on individual-level reception of political facts with varying levels of cross-media diffusion among a large series of respondent subsamples across time and location. Whereas most survey designs require that survey questions be composed in advance of a period of fieldwork, RCS samples are released continuously *during* that period. This, in turn, allows for continuous updating of questions, such that measures of learning can be sensitized to real-time events and to the scope of media coverage emerging in the wake of such events. This brings us to another appealing feature of the RCS design: the precision it allows in attributing effects to events. Because I can ask about facts that surfaced only shortly before the survey, the RCS data permit a direct link between the dissemination and individual acquisition of political information, and so facilitate causal attribution (see Brady & Johnston, 2006).

The study presented in *Chapter 3* of this dissertation draws on data from a RCS survey collected during the campaign of the 2009 elections to the European Parliament. The elections were held between June 4 and 7 in the 27 member states of the EU. The data were collected in Denmark ($n = 4,851$), Germany ($n = 4,931$), the Netherlands ($n = 6,245$), and the United Kingdom ($n = 4,916$). All surveys were administered by TNS. Each country sample is by and large representative of the national adult population (see *Chapter 3* for details about survey procedures and the composition of the samples). In total, the study employs 59 survey waves, each of which carrying a single unique factual information question about a recent occurrence in European politics. I combine the RCS survey data with data from a media content analysis

(as described below), so as to analyze how closely individual-level differences in information acquisition and macro-level differences in information saturation correspond.

Media Content Analysis

Underlying the causal logic of the Conditional Informed Change model is the well-established notion that the media are citizens' primary providers of opportunities to political learning, and hence, to informed updating of political judgments. I emphasized earlier that these opportunities are bound to vary (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), both within and across collective media environments. Opportunity, in other words, is a *variable*. If we accept that the opportunity to encounter and, by extension, acquire a given piece of factual information can be operationalized as the *availability* of that information (e.g., Prior, 2007, p. 28), then any variance in opportunity can be captured through content analyzing the media sources (or a sample thereof) that comprise (or by and large represent) a particular collective environment. Because I am specifically interested in the effects of *information transmission* (as opposed to, for example, the effects of "the media" or different types of media or mere access to certain media), capturing such variance is of crucial importance (see Althaus et al., 2011), especially since my hypotheses require that I explicitly incorporate information transmission into the statistical analyses (see Barabas & Jerit, 2009).⁵

In this dissertation, I combine data from each of the surveys described above with data from media content analyses that accompanied these surveys. These analyses were conducted to determine the availability of specifically those facts which the information questions in the surveys asked about. In analyzing media coverage of the December 2008 EU summit, I included each of the media sources listed in the survey questionnaire so I could subsequently merge data on media source content with data on source reliance. Among these sources were a wide variety of national television sources, including hard news, current affairs, soft news and infotainment programs, and nationally available paid and free newspapers (see *Chapter 2* for details about the design). In analyzing media coverage in the context of the 2009 European elections, I draw on a heterogeneous sample of five major national news sources per country, including the country's main public and commercial television news programs, two leading highbrow newspapers and one tabloid, to establish a measure of information diffusion across

⁵ Content analyses of media coverage are all but common practice in political information and opinion change research. As Barabas and Jerit (2009) note in their review of the political learning literature, "the modal approach to estimating media effects involves the analysis of survey data alone... What this means, then, is that most published work on media effects does not include measures of media content" (p. 74).

the mediated environment as a whole (see *Chapter 3* for details about the design).⁶ I focus on television and newspapers because European citizens consistently rank these media as their most important sources of information about EU politics (e.g., *Eurobarometer 76*, 2012, p. 27), and this approach follows most prominent studies of political learning that incorporate media content data (Barabas & Jerit, 2009; Iyengar, Hahn, Bonfadelli, & Marr, 2009; Jerit et al., 2006).

Outline of the Dissertation

The studies documented in the following four chapters of this dissertation introduce the various hypotheses that follow from the Conditional Informed Change model (see Figure 0.1), and test them using the collection of data described above.⁷ I will begin my investigation by exploring the consequences of political information. The study I present in *Chapter 1* seeks to uncover and contextualize these consequences from a distinctly European political and democratic perspective. It examines if acquiring information following a real-world decision-making event – the EU summit of December 2008 – alters citizens' judgments about the EU's performance. The study places specific emphasis on the role of the political and informational environment in which EU actions materialize, specifies different dimensions of performance, and correlates change in judgments on each dimension with relevant information acquisition. The substantive focus on the EU serves as an introduction to the overall research context of this dissertation, and also aims to contribute directly to the literature on public opinion about European integration (see also Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011).

Once political information acquisition is identified as consequential, we can turn the spotlight on the sources of that information (Druckman, 2005). Two separate studies address the impact of media coverage and motivation on political information. The first, presented in *Chapter 2*, considers the role of media choice and examines if greater availability of political information in specific media sources facilitates acquisition of such information among those reliant on these sources. It also examines whether, and if so how strongly, this effect differs for people with different levels of learning motivation. As I study the influence of *individual* media environments while holding the larger environment constant, I can provide an initial

⁶ These media analyses were performed in cooperation with PIREDEU (Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union). PIREDEU is funded by the European Union's FP 7 program.

⁷ Given that the four research chapters were originally submitted to academic journals as articles co-authored by my advisors, I refer to the author as "we" in these chapters.

snapshot of the saturation-conditional motivation moderation hypothesis. The second study of political learning, presented in *Chapter 3*, considers the role of the media environment *en bloc* and how powerful a force it turns out to be in equipping citizens with political information. It also provides an all-encompassing test of the saturation-conditional motivation moderation hypothesis by specifying the conditions under which motivation moderates the impact of the media environment.

Finally, the study I describe in *Chapter 4* provides an inclusive test of the process of conditional informed change through which information transmission induces learning and, indirectly, induces change in associated political judgments. Specifically, this study analyzes if encounters with factual information about elite performance in the media alters judgments about such performance *by way of* inducing performance-relevant information. It also seeks to reveal how, and how strongly, the impact of relevant information transmission is conditioned by personal characteristics that were identified previously: people's motivation and ability for processing new political information.

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