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

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English Summary

The notion that political information matters has long been considered a conventional normative 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. And yet, while scholars have made remarkable progress in revealing the causes of information about politics, the consequences of acquiring information are not nearly as obvious as many scholars in this area of research like to assume. Indeed, much is still uncertain about the role of political information in modern democracies, particularly regarding its role as an agent of change. 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, 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 politics in general, and European Union politics in particular. The principal argument that I develop in this dissertation is 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 the 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, I primarily utilize the European case as a

context for research that aims to contribute in fields of research dominated by studies of American politics.

I 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. The substantive focus on the EU serves as an introduction to the overall research context of this dissertation. The study 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.

Having assessed the consequential nature of political information acquisition, I turn the spotlight on the sources of that information. 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. The study provides an initial and partial test of my motivation moderation hypothesis, according to which the level of information saturation in the collective media environment conditions the interactive influence of individual information supply and demand. The second study of political learning, presented in *Chapter 3*, considers the role of the collective environment 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 what I refer to as “conditional informed change.” Through this process, I argue, information transmission induces learning and, indirectly, induces change in related political judgments. Specifically, this study analyzes if citizens' encounters with factual information about elite performance in the media alters their 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.

In sum, this dissertation presents several important new insights into the role of the media environment – or more specifically, the *transmission* of political information – as an agent of change in people’s political judgments. It emphasizes the role of opportunity in producing informed citizens, it specifies the circumstances under which citizens’ own motivation does and does not cause inequality in political information, and it explores the contextual and individual conditions that promote “informed change” in public opinion about politics.