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Growing into citizenship: The differential role of the media in the political socialization of adolescents

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Chapter 5: Casting a Political Idol? A TV Casting Show for a Political Party and Its Effects on Adolescents

Abstract

This chapter presents the results of a study of the effects of targeted political information that aimed to increase the political involvement of adolescents. In the discussion concerning the lack of political engagement of adolescents, the media are usually regarded as part of the problem rather than a potential solution. Based on regression analysis preformed on data collected from a representative sample of 15- to 18-year-olds in the Netherlands (N=1653), this study shows that exposure to targeted media content can significantly increase adolescents' political engagement, especially among those with low political interest. To achieve this effect, the program focuses on topics that are relevant to the target group, includes young protagonists, and offers various opportunities for adolescents to become politically active both on- and offline. The results are discussed in light of recent developments related to media malaise theory and the media's potential to engage youths in politics.

Adolescents' general lack of political interest and engagement has been a point of concern in the scientific world and beyond (Putnam 2000; Delli Carpini 2000). Compared to older cohorts, teenagers show little political engagement, particularly with traditional forms of political engagement (e.g., voting, party membership, volunteering in political campaigns, Norris, 2003), and little interest in current events (Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007), even if the information is presented in new media (Subrahmanyam et al., 2001).

Although most of the empirical evidence in the field originates from the USA, European studies indicate that the phenomenon might be universal to Western, established democracies. In Germany, adolescents are less likely to engage in political parties (Niedermayer, 2006) or even to develop a preference for one (Mößner, 2006). Henn and Weinstein (2006) observe a comparable alienation of adolescents from politics in the UK. In the Netherlands, Spangenberg and Lampert (2009) conclude that adolescents have turned their backs on societal responsibilities and call them the "unlimited" generation, after analyzing repeated cross-sectional data of a representative sample of the population.

The consequences of adolescents lack of political engagement for democracy are severe, as political attitudes that individuals develop in preadolescence and adolescence are likely to persist over the course of their lives (Prior, 2010; Sears & Levy, 2003). In a worst case scenario, this may mean that the generation that is growing up in the first decennium of the 21st century will remain distant to the political realm, implying that a large share will exclude themselves from political decision-making processes for their entire lives.

However, there is also evidence to the contrary: in the past two elections in the USA, participation among young voters increased for the first time in almost 20 years (CIRCLE), and adolescents are more likely to engage in voluntary community service than their parent generation at their age (Sears & Levy, 2003). Nevertheless, the majority of the empirical evidence concerning adolescents' political engagement and inclusion in politics indicates that youths of today are "tuned out" (Mindich, 2005). Although adolescents' lack of engagement in politics

and the potential consequences have been studied extensively, very few studies propose solutions to the problem. This study fills this gap in the literature by investigating whether targeted political information in the form of a TV program aimed at a young audience can increase adolescents' involvement in the political world. In this regard, this chapter is different from the two previous chapters of this dissertation. Whereas these previous chapters were dedicated to analyzing the patterns and dynamics of media effects in a real-world situation, this study investigates the effects of an intended deviation from "normal" media use in an intervention study.

The media as a cause of the political alienation of adolescents

In the discussion concerning adolescent's lack of political interest and motivation to participate in politics, the media are usually not considered to be part of the solution. On the contrary, the mass media are often even partially blamed for the political alienation of youths.

In the academic debate, this claim is substantiated by three lines of reasoning that link media exposure to political engagement. The first is a *time budget argument* (Putnam, 2000): teenagers spend more time using media than any other cohort on an average day, 8 hours on an average day (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). In fact, they spend more time using media than they spend in school (Huntemann & Morgan, 2001). Moreover, they are more likely to do so for entertainment or recreational purposes (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Thus, the amount of time that could be spent on acquiring political information, let alone engaging in civic or political activities, is reduced. Hence, according to this argument, media exposure does not actively change adolescent's attitudes toward politics but takes up time that could have been invested in activities that otherwise stimulate political engagement. However, this line of reasoning has been contested. In a survey of 1501 14- to 22-year-olds, Pasek et al. (2006) observe that this argument only holds for heavy users of media content. Occasional media use, even if it is completely unrelated to politics, is found to facilitate youths' political engagement in this study.

The second argument concerns the effect of the general negative style of reporting in political media coverage. In line with *media malaise theory* (for an overview, see Holtz-Bacha, 1990), the basis of this argument is that politics are often presented in a negative light, as political media coverage tends to focus on conflicts, scandals and the Machiavellian game of power rather than issue-oriented policy debates. Being confronted with the failures rather than the virtues of politics, the audience becomes increasingly more cynical toward politics and ultimately refrains from engaging in the political world (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Yet, empirical evidence indicates that this theory does not entirely hold for adolescents. Elenbaas and de Vreese (2008) study the effects of exposure to strategy-framed media content among adolescents and observe a significant effect of such media content on adolescents' level of cynicism. The more strategy-framed news is, the more cynical they become toward the political system. However, higher levels of cynicism did not translate into a lack of political engagement. On the contrary, it has been repeatedly shown that news use positively affects adolescents' political interest and engagement (Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Holtz-Bacha, 1990).

The third and last line of reasoning, the *exclusion argument*, relates to adolescents' situation in the political system and is therefore particularly valid. According to this theory, adolescents' lack of political engagement results from their exclusion from the political world. This argument was first put forward by Katz (1993) in an article in Rolling Stone magazine. Buckingham (1998) revisits the argument and develops it further. He specifies two dimensions of youths' exclusion from politics: the political system and political communication. The system dimension concerns minors' exclusion from institutional political power in democratic systems. Adolescents, who have not reached voting age, are omitted from all formal decision-making processes, e.g., voting and petitions. They are, therefore, an unattractive target group for decision makers, as policy concessions to minors cannot directly translate into electoral support. This has two consequences: a) policy issues that are most relevant to adolescents are often not

on the agenda, and b) political decisions are frequently not made in favor of this particular age group.

The second dimension concerns the communication of politics. Again, the exclusion of minors from the public debate is twofold: first, youths' voices are excluded from the news as *protagonists*, in interviews or talk shows; and second, the *language* of political debates is frequently incomprehensible to a young audience. Thus, the presentation of news and current affairs in the media does not match the style and tastes of adolescents. That is, youths of today are 'tuned out' because the media does not offer political information on their wave-length.

In this chapter, I investigate whether a change in the communication of politics is able to increase the *inclusion* of minors in politics. If adolescents are featured in a political information outlet as important and relevant political actors and the focus is on topics that are relevant to the age group, can this affect the inclusion of minors in the political system? If the lack of young protagonists, comprehensible language and an appealing style in news and the public debate about politics is in fact part of the reason for their alienation from the political world as Buckingham (1997) argues, will an explicit inclusion of these elements in a political TV show positively affect the political engagement of adolescents?

Inclusive TV programming for adolescents

An ideal inclusive political TV show, according to Buckingam's standards, would appeal to a young audience in more ways than by merely including them in the political debate and political process. A program that matches youths' tastes with regard to protagonists, topics, and style would trigger several mechanisms of media effects that are known in the literature.

Young and attractive protagonists enable the audience to positively identify with the characters on television. This, however, stimulates model learning according to Bandura's (2009) Social Cognitive Theory. According to this theory, observed behavior in the media triggers learning mechanisms on concrete as well as abstract levels. Identification with the model is a positive moderator in

this process. The more that an individual feels connected to a model in the media, the more likely the individual is to imitate the observed behavior. Therefore, we can expect TV programs that feature young protagonists who engage in politics to stimulate those viewers who identify with these protagonists to become active themselves.

The second feature of an inclusive TV program is content that is both interesting and relevant for a young audience. By focusing on issues that are close to the reality of adolescents, information about politics becomes more approachable and understandable. According to theories that explain the mechanisms of information processing (Fisch, 2009), adolescents are more likely to understand and learn from information that is transmitted through mass media if it relates to issues that are familiar to them. The reason is that information is usually processed through already established cognitive links. The more links that individuals have to new information, the better they are able to process it. Thus, political TV programs that focus on topics and problems that adolescents know and care about are much more likely to be remembered and processed.

Lastly, using a "young" style and language in an ideal inclusive TV program can enhance viewers' ability to remember the content and increase the program's potential to change the behavior of the audience. This can be explained by theoretical work in research on advertisement (Gleich, 2000). Style elements such as music, staging and editing influence the mood of the audience, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that the presented information is memorized and positively evaluated.

These three features—young protagonists, relevant and interesting topics for a young audience, and a young program style—were key elements of the targeted political information program Lijst 0, which is investigated in this chapter.

Targeted political information program: Lijst 0

The targeted political information program investigated in this chapter, "Lijst 0",

was an eight-episode political TV program that was broadcasted prior to the Dutch parliamentary elections in 2010. The series featured the foundation of a political party for young people. In the first episodes, the front-runner of the party was determined in an *American Idol*-like competition, and the audience was invited to vote for their favorite candidate by using text messaging (SMS). After the audience had decided on a front-runner, the producers of the program supported the candidate in founding a political party. In the subsequent episodes, the audience followed the steps of the party, which was formally running in the general elections in the same year. For example, one of the first tasks of the newly elected front-runner, Lot Feijens, was to find a name for the new party. Feijens called the party Lijst 17, which referred to the name of the TV program (Lijst 0) as well as their position on the ballot. The next episodes covered other pivotal elements of the election campaign of the party: the founding assembly, formal registration, first press conference, discussion and decision concerning the party manifesto, election campaign and, lastly, Election Day. In addition to the coverage of the upcoming party called "Lijst 17", the most popular established parties were also part of the program, primarily in form of a quiz in which the front-runner had to answer questions that were relevant to youths to determine his or her "real age". Moreover, the producers of the program also organized a televised public debate a few days prior to the election in a popular club in Amsterdam in which the front-runners of the most popular established parties and of "Lijst 17" answered the questions of a young audience.

The program had an average audience share of 8.5% for young adults (20–34), which is a little below average for political information programs in the Netherlands (van Baars & Zandbergen, 2010). In the general elections, the party that was founded in the program received 7456 votes, one-eighth of what is needed to win a seat in parliament.

Despite its mediocre success in terms of audience and election results, the program is a good example of a program that includes youths in political communication because it features youth-related topics and young protagonists. Moreover, the program went beyond merely broadcasting information and aimed

to mobilize its audience to engage in politics both off- and online. As an example, over the course of the TV series, the party Lijst 17 organized several demonstrations and rallies, which were advertised via *Facebook*, a Dutch social networking site called *Hyves* and *Twitter*. The public debate with the front-runners was publically accessible, as was the constitutional meeting of the party, and the audience was invited to attend. The most significant interactive feature of the program was that the audience could vote for the protagonists of the show in the actual elections. Additionally, there were ample opportunities to discuss the candidates and the issues discussed in the show online, either directly with the candidates through their Twitter accounts and social network sites or on a more general level through the TV program's homepage and Twitter account .

Hypotheses

Based on the three different theories linking adolescents' media exposure to adolescents' political involvement mentioned above, I expect to find effects of exposure to the targeted political information program on two levels: a) political cynicism and b) political engagement.

Political cynicism

The reception of the TV program in the Dutch media was mixed. Although the effort to actively engage adolescents in politics was generally appreciated, there were also concerns regarding whether the "young" and somewhat silly style of the program degraded politics and portrayed protagonists who were anything but role-model politicians. In the words of media critic Hans Beerekamp (translated by the author):

> *After the audience sent the only candidate that presented a story with content home, because she was "too serious" (and on top of that, she had brought her father to the show and wore the wrong clothes), the remaining candidates are rather vague: two girls that took off part of their clothing because all young people*

are "standing in their shirts", one depressive dopehead and a few candidates with experience in the student union ….[18]

These concerns are in line with a broader discussion in the literature, namely, in the media malaise debate. According to Putnam (2000), Cappella & Jamieson (1997) and other advocates of this theory, the focus of the media on scandals leads the audience to believe that politicians care primarily about themselves and their position rather than the public good. Therefore, the media are directly responsible for increasing political cynicism. This especially holds for media content that is cynical or satirical about politics (Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011).

The targeted political information program that is studied in this chapter should be no exception to this rule. The front-runner of Lijst 17 was chosen by a telephone vote, after presenting her political position in her underwear. Her competitors sang or danced during the audition. All of this might have fueled the perception a strong character and sufficient intelligence are not needed to become a politician. The emphasis on presentation rather than the political content continued during the entire show. Therefore, I expect to find that exposure to the targeted political information program lead to an increase in political cynicism.

H1: Exposure to the targeted political information program leads to higher levels of political cynicism.

Political engagement

Whereas exposure to targeted political information is expected to have negative influence in terms of political cynicism, I expect to find a positive impact of exposure to targeted political information on political engagement. This hypothesis is consistent with research in the field (De Vreese & Semetko 2002) and

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[18] Published in NRC Handelsblad, 26.4.2010: Zapikliklees: Niet alle jongeren staan in hun hemd.

can be substantiated with Buckingham's (1997) argument that exclusion causes political alienation. As pointed out earlier, because of it youth-oriented the style, language and approach, the targeted political information program was able to avoid the exclusion problems of traditional political information programs, which fail to include topics that are relevant for a young audience and to present information in a language that is interesting and understandable for adolescents (Katz, 1993). Where traditional political information programs exclude youths, the targeted political information program aimed to include youths in various ways to inform them about opportunities to be part of the political process. Therefore, I expect to find mobilizing effects of the targeted political information on its audience, not merely in terms of voter turnout. The program also presented a wide range of opportunities to engage in democracy by discussing politics online, engaging in demonstrations or actively contributing to a political party. As the largest part of the sample had not reached voting age yet, this chapter focuses on these alternative ways of participating in the democratic process.

H2: Exposure to the targeted political information program leads to higher levels of political engagement.

In addition to testing the predictions of media malaise theory and the exclusion argument, I am interested in the causal ordering of relations between media use (and the targeted political information program, in particular) and political engagement[19]. Specifically, traditional news use and exposure to the targeted political information program may be related to each other. Two scenarios are possible. Either the influences of both sources are completely unrelated, or, more likely, exposure to the targeted political information program mediates the effects of exposure to traditional news. In such a mediating relationship, news exposure affects the likelihood of exposure to the targeted

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[19] It should be noted that the direction of causality in this case is likely to be bidirectional (see Chapter 3). Yet, this cannot be considered in the model because of data constraints. I therefore make no claims regarding the direction of causality, but I do make claims about the causal path through mediation.

political information program, which in turn affects political engagement. That is, it could be that only those who already follow the news take an interest in the program, which causes a potential change in political engagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Full mediation would imply that there is no relationship between news use and political engagement when exposure to the targeted political information program is controlled for. More likely, in this particular case, there is partial mediation, indicating that there are *direct* effects of news use on political engagement as well as *indirect* effects through exposure to the targeted political information program.

RQ1: What is the relation between general news use and exposure to the targeted political information program?

A second specification of the model is relevant in the context of this analysis. Coleman (2008) expresses concerns that media interventions aimed at including adolescents in the public political debate would only reach those who are already information rich and from a well-off background; this concern is consistent with the knowledge gap hypothesis, as explained in Chapter 3. If this hypothesis holds, targeted political information programs, even if they are successful, only reach those who need it the least and would contribute to increasing the information gap between well-educated and less-educated individuals. To empirically investigate this hypothesis, several interaction effects of socio-demographic and attitudinal variables are tested. I expect to find that information-rich individuals are more likely to benefit from exposure to the targeted political information program.

H3: The relationship between exposure to the targeted political information program and political engagement is moderated by education, social class, and political interest.

Control variables

In addition to the socio-economic background of the respondent, two important control variables are included in the analytical models. The first is the educational background of the parents. This variable is included to account for potential effects

of the level of political discussion at home (Percheron & Jennings, 1981). The second included control variable is *political interest*. Arguably, political interest could also be treated as a dependent or at least a mediating variable in this context. However, I include political interest as an independent variable to account for self-selection effects of media use. In many cases, the causal relationship between any form media use and political attitudes or behavior is two sided and reciprocal (Slater, 2007). Thus, those who are politically interested tend to use media outlets that cover political information, which, in turn, increases their political interest. To fully uncover the causal relationship between political interest and political information use, longitudinal panel data are needed, which are not available in this study. Therefore, political interest is statistically controlled for to achieve a conservative test of the hypotheses.

Method

To test for the influence of the targeted political information program on political cynicism and political engagement, I rely on a post-test-only quasi-experimental research design. The data were collected through CAWI interviews of a representative[20] sample of Dutch adolescents between the ages 15 and 18. The questionnaire contained about 60 questions concerning political engagement, media use, and the background variables. The respondents took, on average, 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The research was conducted from 16.06.2010 to 11.07.2010 and took place directly after the elections of 2010 and the last episode of the targeted political information program. In total, 1653 respondents participated in the survey; the response rate was 70%.

Operationalization

The dependent and independent variables are measured using established scales

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[20] The sample was provided by a professional opinion research institute (GfK). They administer an existing representative sample of the Dutch population from which the respondents in this survey were drawn.

to the extent possible, although some of the scales had to be adapted to the adolescent population. Political cynicism was measured using a shortened version of the Cappella & Jamieson (1997) scale ("Politicians deliberately promise more than they can deliver", "Politicians primarily look out for their own interests", "You are more likely to win a seat in Parliament through the influence of your political friends than based on your capabilities", "Government officials do not care what people like you think"; Cronbach's Alpha: .95, M: 3.50, SE: .02). All items were measured on a 7-point scale. Contrary to the second chapter of this dissertation in which I studied the effects of media on political trust, I investigate effects of media on political cynicism. Although political trust and political cynicism should not simply be considered to be two ends of a unidimensional continuum, they are certainly related to one another.

Political engagement was measured on a cumulative scale of engagement in various political activities (Cronbach's Alpha: .85, M: .17, SE: .005)*: a) offline*: Boycott or buycott a product for political reasons, participate in student or other elections, participate in a demonstration, write political messages on walls, collect signatures, participate in a campaign rally or engage in an election campaign, donate money or collect donations, wear a t-shirt with a political message. *b) online:* Post a political message or video on a social networking site, chat or tweet about a political subject, sign an online petition, participate in a political discussion online, use an electronic election advisor, organize an online discussion or petition, join a cause on Facebook, forward a video or link with a political message, blog about politics, send an e-mail to a politician. Each item was measured on a 3-point scale (never, sometimes, and frequently).

General interest in the news was measured using a weighted measure of exposure to a number of Dutch news outlets in a typical week (0-7)[21] (Cronbach's Alpha: .79, M: 3.50, SE: .09). The raw scores were weighted by an attention measure ("When you are using one of the news outlet, do you give them with a lot

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[21] The individual exposure measures where weighted to account for differences in publication intervals.

of attention or rather use them in passing"). Weighting the attention measure served two purposes: a) it accounts for demands to include attention measures in measurements of media exposure, and b) the attention measure turned out to be higher for news outlets that provide in-depth information, which means that they have a stronger influence on the absolute measure, thus increasing the validity of the general measure. *Exposure to the targeted political information program* was measured by a dichotomous variable. Respondents who had seen the program at least once received a value of 1; all other respondents received a value of 0.

To analyze the data, I use an Ordinary Least Squares regression analysis. In addition to the abovementioned variables, I include educational background[22], political education program in their schools[23], formal education of their mother[24], age, gender, social class[25], and political interest[26] as control variables.

Results

Of all 1653 respondents, 280 (17%) had seen the targeted political information program at least once. The audience in the sample was generally satisfied with the program. In all, 64% of the 280 respondents liked it, and only 15 % of the audience

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[22] This variable was measured by an ordinal scale indicating the highest level of education they are currently enrolled in.

[23] This variable was measured by an cumulative scale of four items (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.75, M: 3.37, SE: .03): teachers encourage us to discuss political or social problems in school; students feel free to disagree with teachers when debating political or social issues; the school organizes political debates, test elections or political role games; and the school organizes excursions to political institutions. All items were measured on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7.

[24] This variable was measured by an ordinal scale measuring the highest level of education completed. We chose to only include the formal education of the mother in the model to avoid distortions of heterogenous living situations in patch-work families.

[25] This variable was measured by directly asking for the social class of the respondent. It would have been preferable to ask for household income rather than the social class to avoid asocial desirability bias, but previous studies in the field have shown that minors frequently do not know their household income.

[26] This variable was measured on a 7-point scale ("Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?")

thought it was boring. In all, 25% claimed that they had thought about electing the party that was founded in the program. Yet, only 40% agreed with the statement that they had learned something about election campaigns, and only 13% could imagine participating in future editions of the program. With regard to whether the program contributed to political cynicism, it is interesting to note that 44% of the audience agreed with the statement "the candidates of the show are not ready to be politicians".

However, the OLS regression analysis revealed that exposure to the targeted political information program did not significantly influence the respondents' political cynicism, as predicted in Hypothesis 1.

The model has a good fit, as it is able to explain 26% of the variance of the dependent variable. Table 5.1 shows that exposure to the targeted political information program has a highly significant influence on political engagement. Thus, the data support Hypothesis 2 that exposure to the targeted political information program is positively related to the political involvement of adolescents. Additional analysis revealed that those who had watched the targeted political information are predicted to participate in 0.8 more political activities than those who had not. Of the 26 types of political activities that I included in the measure of political engagement, online activities show the highest correlations with exposure to the targeted political information program: use an electronic election aid (*r:* .21), sign an online petition (*r:* .14), chat about politics (*r:* .14), and join a cause on Facebook (*r:* .12).

Table 5.1: Summary of OLS Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Political Cynicism (N = 1653)

	Political Cynicism		
Variable	B	SE B	B
Age	- 0.01	0.025	-.01
Gender	- 0.17	0.055	-.07**
Social Class	0.17	0.036	.12**
Political Education	- 0.03	0.022	-.03
Education	-0.001	0.002	-.01
Parental Education	-0.08	0.032	-.06*
Political Interest	-0.04	0.018	-.079*
Targeted political information exposure	-0.05	0.076	-.01
Hard news exposure	-0.007	0.008	-.02
Intercept	4.12**	.46	
Adjusted R^2	.04		
F	8.76**		

*Note: *p < .05. **p < .01.*

With regard to the influence of the targeted political information program on political engagement, the results do support my expectations. Table 5.2 presents the results of the regression analysis for political engagement.

Table 5.2: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Political Engagement (N = 1594)

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	B	B	SE B	β
Age	0.01	0.004	.08**	0.02	0.004	.08**
Gender	0.01	0.008	.03	0.01	0.008	.03
Social Class	-0.01	0.005	-.02	-0.04	0.006	-.02
Political Education	0.03	0.003	.18**	0.03	0.000	.18**
Education	0.00	0.005	.03	0.00	0.005	.03
Parental Education	0.003	0.005	.02	0.00	0.003	.02
Political Interest	0.02	0.003	.19**	0.02	0.003	.19**
Targeted political information exp.	0.03	0.012	.05**	0.03	0.027	.05**
Hard news exp.	0.01	0.001	.28**	0.01	0.001	.28**
Pol. interest * Targeted political information exp.				-.013	0.007	-.10*
Intercept	-0.30**	.074				
Adjusted R²	.266			.268		
F	2.87			8.94**		

*Note: *p* < .05. **p* < .01., significance of the moderator is tested one sided

Two additional questions were posed concerning the causal mechanism that is at play: the first concerned the potential mediating effects of general news use, and the second concerned the interaction effects of socio-demographic factors and attitudinal variables.
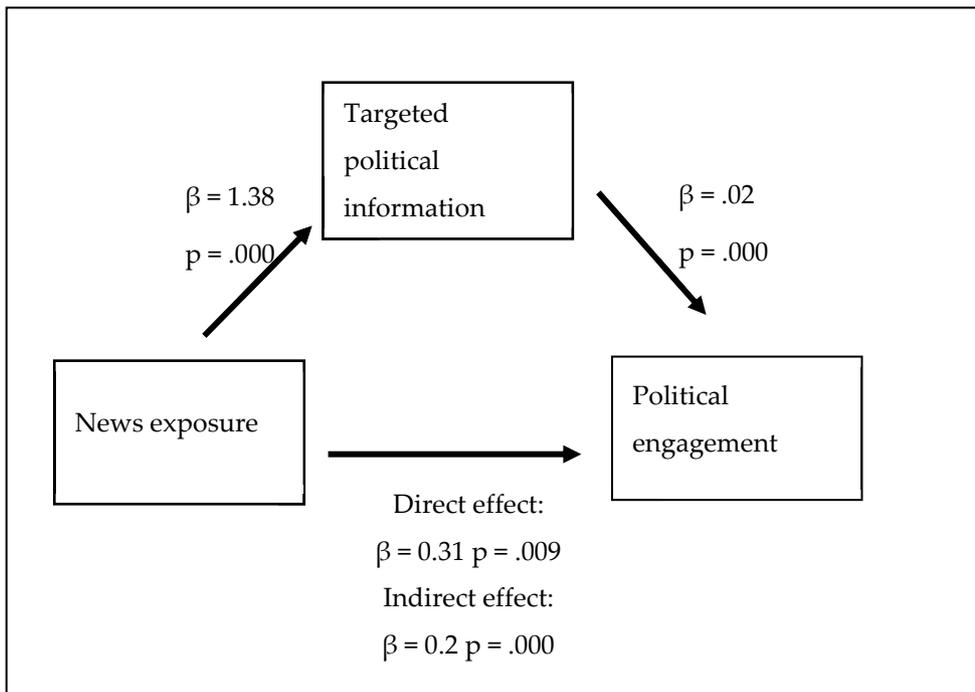
Figure 5.1. Mediation effect

Figure 5.1 presents the results of the mediation analysis that was carried out using the SPSS macros of Preacher and Hayes (2004). The total effect of hard news use on the dependent variable is beta = 0.51, which consists of a direct effect (beta = 0.31) and an indirect effect through exposure to the targeted political information program (beta = 0.2). The statistical significance of the latter effect was estimated using bootstrapping (2000 resamples). As there is still a significant direct effect, there is no evidence of full mediation. The findings do indicate partial mediation, however.

With regard to the expected interaction effects (H3), the results are mixed. There is no empirical evidence for an interaction effect between social class, education, or parental education and exposure to the targeted political information program. I did find a significant interaction effect between political interest and exposure to the targeted political information program, though not in the expected

direction. According to the analysis presented in table 2, adolescents who show little political interest benefit the most from the program in terms of political engagement (see also Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Interaction effect
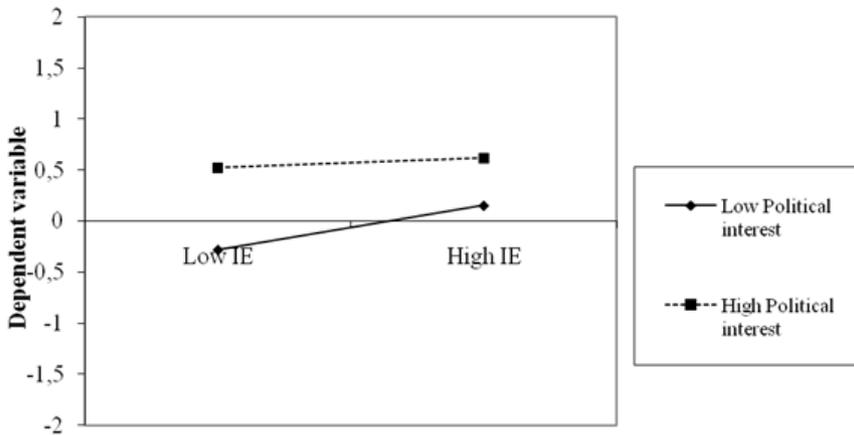
Discussion

In this chapter, I investigated how and to what degree a targeted political information program can influence the political involvement of adolescents. Such an investigation is particularly relevant, as the involvement of adolescents in traditional political activities is decreasing in the United States and Europe. The media is generally regard to have a negative influence on adolescents political engagement, because media use takes up time that could otherwise be spent on political activities (Shah et al., 2001), the media presents the strategic plays for power that are involved in politics rather than policy debates that are crucial to modern societies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and the media excludes young citizens in various ways (Buckingham, 1997; Katz, 1993).

The analysis presented in this chapter shows that a TV program that uses youth-oriented content, style and protagonists can positively influence youths' political involvement without increasing their political cynicism. Political cynicism

was a concern in this study because the program included several features that have been shown to increase political cynicism in previous research (Elenbaas & de Vreese, 2008; Putnam, 2000): it focused on the competition rather than on political issues, it was highly personalized, and the political candidates were not considered very competent. Still, according to the analysis, there was no significant effect of exposure to *List 0* on political cynicism. However, it should be noted that the results should be interpreted with caution, as there is still room to improve the specification of the model.

The second model explaining political engagement showed a much better model fit and indicated that the targeted political information program indeed served a mobilizing function. Those adolescents who had watched the program showed a higher level of political engagement, particularly online engagement. These results indicate that the exclusion of minors from political debate can be partially overcome by adjusting the political debate and offering targeted media content. Moreover, the effect of the program was the strongest for those who normally show little interest in politics. This result indicates that the program did not only reach information-rich individuals as Coleman (2008) feared but rather inspired exactly those who usually are the least engaged in politics. This finding is particularly interesting in the light of the knowledge gap hypothesis. According to many studies in the field (for an overview, see Eveland & Scheufele 2000), traditional news sources are most effective in terms of political mobilization and learning for those viewers with the most political interest, the most education, and the highest income. This implies that traditional news sources contribute to a knowledge and participation gap between information-rich and information-poor individuals, as well as a skewed representation of the population in politics. The findings of this study indicate that adjusting political information programs to include youth-oriented topics and protagonists can help to bridge the gap between people of various means and backgrounds.

Yet, the fact that the targeted political information program was effective does not mean that traditional sources of political information were irrelevant for political mobilization. On the contrary, traditional news outlets had a strong and

positive impact on political engagement, indicating that individuals who watch the news on television or read the newspaper are more actively engaged in politics. Individuals with high traditional news use were also more likely to watch the targeted political information program, which, in turn, lead to an even higher degree of mobilization. Therefore, I do not claim that traditional news outlets should change and become more youth oriented to appeal to younger audiences. Instead, I recommend adding complementary, youth-oriented political information outlets to the existing news landscape. The findings of this study suggest that a variety of media sources inspire and mobilize youths.

However, when interpreting the results, it is important to note that there are significant data constraints, and thus, the results should be interpreted with cautious. The most important constraint is that this chapter presents the results of a study on the media effects of one specific program using cross-sectional data. To ensure that the causality runs in the expected direction and that the effect is correctly attributed to the exposure to this program, it would have been beneficial to apply a 2x2 experimental design rather than a post-test-only experimental design. The results would arguably be more convincing if I could prove through pre-test data that users of the targeted information program indeed engaged more in politics compared to non-users. With such a design, the possibility of self-selection would have been eliminated. According to the results with regard to the development of political knowledge, self-selection very likely to have occurred, as those who were more likely to engage in politics the first place are also more likely to watch the program. However, controlling for political interest did partially solve this problem.

Second, as this study on media effects was not conducted in a laboratory environment, we cannot be certain that the increased political engagement in fact resulted from exposure to this one specific TV program. Other events that took place during the study period might have caused adolescents to become more engaged in politics. However, such influences would not explain a significantly different level of engagement between users of the program and non-users of the program, as these events could have affected both groups.

Still, despite its positive effects, targeted political information programs such as *Lijst 0* are not the universal solution to all problems associated with the lack of political engagement of adolescents during the past few decades. First, even though the program was watched by 17% of the sample, 83% of the sample did not tune in and therefore could not benefit from the positive effects of the program. They remain excluded, and it is unlikely that more and other media interventions will reach them. Second, a program like *Lijst 0* is not suitable for informing and explaining all kinds of political issues. The program produced positive results in the very particular context of a national general election campaign, which is a period in which political issues are both relevant and exciting because of the competition between the parties. Concerning the everyday politics, the task of the media is primarily to inform the audience about complex policy issues, such as alternative measures for integrating foreigners in society or budget issues, and a different approach may be needed to reach youths. A 19-year-old protagonist without a political background who hardly understands political issues herself might not be suitable person to present the issues in this context. Lastly, the rather small size of the effect should be noted. Although participation in one additional political activity is a considerable improvement, it is not enough to facilitate active citizenship. Other agents of political socialization (Sears and Levy, 2003), particularly political education at school, are thus needed. In my analysis, this factor proved to be the single most important factor in stimulating political engagement and was far more important than the level of formal education of the respondents and their parents.

To summarize the results of this chapter and answer the research question of whether a targeted political information program can mitigate the exclusion of youths from politics, the answer is yes, it can. However, parents and, more importantly, schools need to play a part in the general political education of adolescents. If adolescents are educated about their role in democracy by schools and parents, a TV program that shows them how they can make their voice heard in a democratic political system and that provides them with various opportunities to do so can thrive even more than the program investigated in this chapter.

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