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A Comparative Study in 18 Countries

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DOI

[10.1093/ijpor/edae046](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae046)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

International Journal of Public Opinion Research

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schemer, C., Stanyer, J., Meltzer, C. E., Gehle, L., Van Aelst, P., Theocharis, Y., Strömbäck, J., Štětka, V., Stpińska, A., Splendore, S., Zoizner, A., Matthes, J., Koc-Michalska, K., Hopmann, D. N., Esser, F., de Vreese, C., David, Y., Corbu, N., Castro, L., ... Halagiera, D. (2024). The relationship Between Political Entertainment Media Use and Political Efficacy: A Comparative Study in 18 Countries. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 36(4), Article edae046. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edae046>

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The Relationship Between Political Entertainment Media Use and Political Efficacy: A Comparative Study in 18 Countries

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Abstract

Political entertainment programs have gained worldwide popularity, prompting research on their effects. One area of interest has been whether this media programming has an impact upon political efficacy. However, existing literature has only examined the impact of a limited number of programs, has failed to consider the simultaneous influence of different genres, and has focused primarily on the US. To address these limitations, we conducted a comparative survey in 18 democracies in 2022, with a sample size of $N = 26,000$. The findings revealed that viewers of political talk shows exhibited higher levels of both external and internal political efficacy in most countries. Additionally, frequent exposure to political comedy news or satire was positively related to internal political efficacy in certain countries. Finally, the consumption of fictional political dramas was also linked to political efficacy, but only in a few countries.

The level of political efficacy (PE) is an important indicator of a healthy democracy and legitimate governance (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). PE is defined as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, that is, that it is worthwhile to perform one’s civic duties” (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187).

Follow-up research showed that PE consisted of two distinct notions (Craig, & Maggionto, 1982; Morrell, 2003). The first notion was the effectiveness dimension, also termed internal PE, reflecting individuals’ perception of their ability to participate in the political process. The second notion was the system responsiveness dimension, also known as external PE,

which referred to the expectation that political authorities were responsive to the demands of the public. Both dimensions were important predictors of citizens' roles in political decision-making and were fundamental to democratic outcomes, that is, political trust, participation, and voting (Craig, & Maggiotto, 1982; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990).¹

The empirical relationship between patterns of political media use and PE has been well documented (Hoffman, & Thomson, 2009; Pinkleton, & Austin, 2001; Semetko, & Valkenburg, 1998). These studies have shown that exposure to news that emphasized conflict, scandal, or the horse-race among political candidates decreased PE. Conversely, exposure to high-quality or constructive news, as well as opportunities to interact with politicians online increased PE (Kenski, & Stroud, 2006; Newton, 2017; Schuck, 2017).

With the hybridization of political information and the growing popularity of political entertainment media, scholarly interest in the effects of such media has increased (Baym, & Holbert, 2019; Becker, & Waisanen, 2013; Tsfati, & Walter, 2017). Political entertainment media encompass a range of specific programs that can vary in the centrality and explicitness of their political messaging (Holbert, 2005, for a typology). Long, Jeong, & Lavis, (2021) defined political entertainment media as a range of genres that “discuss politics in addition to other topics, raise politics in the context of comedic or dramatic portrayals of fictional or non-fictional content, or some mixture of these” (p. 167). While scholars may have differing opinions on this definition, there is agreement that entertainment programs are politically relevant, since both the audience and political actors consider them relevant, and they can have a considerable impact on the audience (Delli Carpini, 2017). Most studies have examined the effects of specific entertainment genres on PE, for example, late-night talk shows (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2016; Hoffman & Young, 2011), political talk shows (Mutz, 2015; Mutz, & Reeves, 2005), political humor (Baumgartner, & Morris, 2006), or political dramas (Manoliu, 2019; Mutz, & Nir, 2010). However, previous research has been limited in a number of respects, making it difficult to infer the generalizability and universality of the results.

First, most research has focused only on the impact of one genre without considering exposure to other genres. As Holbert (2005, p. 449) noted, “No one entertainment outlet functions in a vacuum relative to other types of entertainment.” Only a few studies have examined multiple outlets on the information-entertainment continuum simultaneously

¹ Previous research has frequently treated political trust and external PE as distinct but closely related constructs that have similar effects (Newton, 2017; Schuck, 2017). Both variables involve citizens' perceptions of whether political actors are serving the public interest. As a result, political trust and external PE overlap because both reflect citizens' expectations as to whether political actors are responsive and act in the best interest of the public (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). Due to this overlap, some authors may present findings related to PE and political trust or cynicism under a single heading (Becker, & Waisanen, 2013; Schuck, 2017; Tsfati, & Walter, 2017).

Supporting this idea of similar effects are studies that measured political trust by examining trust in politicians using indicators that closely resembled, or were identical to, those used in external PE scales (e.g., Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Hoffman & Young, 2011; Mutz, & Reeves, 2005). Furthermore, the results of these studies were similar, regardless of whether external PE or political trust was used as the criterion variable (Balmas, 2014; Jones, & Paris, 2018). Therefore, in our review of existing research, we also considered studies that explored political trust but could provide insights into external PE as well. Despite seeing similar patterns of correlations with criterion variables, we nevertheless assume that political trust and external PE are theoretically distinct constructs.

(but see Long, Jeong, & Lavis, 2021; Moy, & Pfau, 2000; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009).

Second, studies have frequently concentrated on one aspect of PE while neglecting the other. Research on the impact of political humor, for instance, has typically assessed internal PE while disregarding potential consequences on external PE (e.g., Balmas, 2014; Baumgartner, & Morris, 2008; Becker, 2011; Hoffman, & Young, 2011). However, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) revealed that, in addition to increasing internal PE, watching political humor also reduced cynicism, which, based on their specific measurement, can be considered similar to low levels of external PE. Entertainment outlets were thus found to have a positive impact on one dimension of PE while simultaneously harming another, indicating a need for a more thorough examination of the potential side effects.

Third, most previous research on the effects of political entertainment has been focused on the US, with only a few studies conducted in other countries (e.g., Balmas, 2014; Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Manoliu, 2019; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). Despite the global presence of these genres and calls from scholars to better understand cross-cultural differences (Holbert, Hill, & Lee, 2014; Tsfati, & Walter, 2017), comparative studies examining the relationship between the consumption of political entertainment media and PE have been lacking.

The present study, therefore, aims to address these limitations and explores the following research question: What is the relationship between different types of political entertainment, that is, political talk shows, political humor, and political drama, and between internal as well as external PE in various countries? Our study begins with a review of the literature on the effects of political entertainment media, followed by a description of the methodology used and the presentation of survey results. Our findings show a significant association between the consumption of political entertainment media and both internal and external PE; these relationships are similar in magnitude to those for the consumption of news from traditional sources. Any inconsistencies in the results are discussed in the concluding section of the article. The role played by political entertainment media is a crucial consideration for public opinion scholars and communication researchers wishing to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the media environment influences individuals' formation of judgments and their participation in political processes.

Literature Review

Scholars have largely abandoned the perspective that political entertainment is harmful to the public and that only political news is beneficial to people's political reasoning and decision making (Delli Carpini, 2017; Moy, Johnson, & Barthel, 2014; Newton, 2017). Contemporary research on the topic has revealed several key points: First, the blending of political information with entertainment has resulted in a diversity of media genres and formats (Baym, & Holbert, 2019; Tsfati, & Walter, 2017). While the audience for traditional news has decreased, the popularity of entertainment media has increased (Delli Carpini, 2017; Prior, 2007). This means that entertainment media, including political entertainment, can no longer be ignored when studying the influence of mediated environments on political participation.

Second, political entertainment media can have positive effects on democracy. For example, these programs can help

viewers learn about politics (Kim, & Vishak, 2008), serve as entry points for news consumption and participation (Hoffman, & Young, 2011; Long, Jeong, & Lavis, 2021), and enhance voting (Baum, & Jamison, 2011; Baumgartner, & Lockerbie, 2018). Entertainment programs are therefore politically relevant because they impact political outcomes (Delli Carpini, 2017).

Third, scholars have developed theoretical frameworks to categorize political entertainment content and understand its effects (Baym, & Holbert, 2019; Becker, 2020; Holbert, 2005). This advancement has considerably broadened the focus of research on political entertainment. As a result, research now acknowledges that political entertainment is not a monolithic category, but rather a multifaceted subject that requires scholarly sophistication to improve the study of its popularity and effects (Baym, & Holbert, 2019; Delli Carpini, 2017).

Despite the need for more theoretical integration in the study of political entertainment, most studies have focused on the content or the effects of specific genres or of programs within three broad genres: talk shows, political humor, and political dramas (Baym, & Holbert, 2019; Holbert, Hill, & Lee, 2014; Jones, & Paris, 2018). Holbert (2005) has proposed a typology that categorized programs and genres based on their level of political primacy and explicitness. This typology suggested that the political primacy of political talk shows, political humor, and fictional political dramas was high because politics dominated other content aspects. However, these genres were assumed to differ in terms of political explicitness, with talk shows being the most explicit, satire being the most implicit, and fictional dramas falling somewhere in between (Holbert, 2005). While these subgenres may be considered hybrids of political information and entertainment, they likely differ in their relationship with PE.

Previous research has suggested that political entertainment media consumption has assimilation or message-consistent effects on PE. Specifically, positive portrayals in political talk shows (Becker, 2020; Hoffman, & Thomson, 2009), political comedy (Becker, 2011; Hoffman, & Young, 2011), or in political fiction (Mutz, & Nir, 2010; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001) should primarily result in positive effects on the audience, increasing PE, while negative portrayals were assumed to produce negative effects, decreasing PE (Baumgartner, & Lockerbie, 2018; Manoliu, 2019; Mutz, & Reeves, 2005). Message-inconsistent relationships and null results have been found as well, however (Baum, & Jamison, 2011; Baumgartner, & Lockerbie, 2018; Becker, & Waisanen, 2013). Three important gaps in existing research can account for these inconsistencies.

First, most studies have examined the association of a specific genre with PE in isolation. Focusing solely on specific outlets without considering the important effects of other genres means these studies are prone to omission bias (Holbert, 2005). Second, scholars have frequently studied only one dimension of PE while disregarding the other. However, political entertainment media can increase internal PE while simultaneously decreasing external PE (Baumgartner, & Lockerbie, 2018; Baumgartner, & Morris, 2006). Assessing both internal and external PE is therefore imperative for achieving a more complete picture of the effects of entertainment media. Finally, most research has come from the US with virtually no comparative studies (Tsfati, & Walter, 2017; but, see Xenos, Moy, Mazzoleni, & Mueller-Herbst, 2018). While there may be many commonalities across countries

(e.g., the worldwide success of dramas like *House of Cards*, talk shows like the German *Heute Show*, 2009-present, as an adaptation of the *Daily Show*), suggesting similar effects on PE (Eilders, & Nitsch, 2015), cultural differences may produce idiosyncratic results as well (e.g., late night talk shows in European countries are more issue-oriented and confrontational than U.S. late-night shows, which are arguably more image-oriented). We cannot simply assume that the effects of political entertainment will be the same across all countries. This underscores the importance of explicitly examining country differences in terms of the relationships between different entertainment genres and PE (Tsfati, & Walter, 2017). In the following sections, we review previous research on the exposure to political talk shows, political humor, and political dramas and discuss the gaps in research.

The Relationship Between the Viewing of Political Talk Shows and Political Efficacy

Political talk shows are an important format for presenting political actors and issues in a way that is more engaging than traditional news (Baum, & Jamison, 2011; Baym, 2013). These programs can be both informative and entertaining, as they involve interviewing politicians or presenting a clash of ideas (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Mutz, 2015). Talk show categories include interrogative debate style interviews, late-night shows with interviews or jokes, variety shows with jokes and celebrity interviews, mock news programs, and sketch-based shows (Baum, 2005; Moy, Johnson, & Barthel, 2014; Stevenson, 2010). Research has shown that these programs frequently had message-consistent negative and positive effects on PE.

One line of research has suggested that highly contentious talk shows can reduce PE in the audience (Mutz, 2015; Mutz, & Reeves, 2005). Mutz and Reeves (2005) argued that highly confrontational talk and uncivil forms of communication went against everyday conversational norms. When these norms were violated, people perceived politics as a dirty business, potentially leading to alienation from politicians and the political process. The authors experimentally demonstrated that an excessive amount of conflict in political talk shows decreased viewers' trust in politicians compared to constructive discussions (Mutz, & Reeves, 2005). Because their measurement of trust in politicians overlapped with items commonly used to measure external PE, their findings indicated that exposure to highly confrontational talk shows was likely to reduce external PE. Other studies have yielded similar results (Forgette, & Morris, 2006; Mutz, 2015). Additionally, one longitudinal survey showed that frequent viewing of late-night talk shows decreased internal PE over time (Long, Jeong, & Lavis, 2021). However, this study did not examine whether talk show viewing had an impact on external PE.

Some research findings have cautioned against drawing premature conclusions about the potentially corrosive effects of political talk shows (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Pinkleton, & Austin, 2001; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). The previous experiments compared the impact of highly confrontational and uncivil talk shows with versions where politicians adhered to politeness norms. In reality, political talk shows vary considerably in their tone, with discussions that are sometimes constructive and informative and sometimes uncivil and pointless (Baum, & Jamison, 2011; Baym, 2013). The genre provides an opportunity for political actors

to present themselves positively and emphasize their positive qualities (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016). Additionally, talk show hosts can be sympathetic and supportive of their political guests (Baum, 2005; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). Based on these content features, it can be assumed that viewing political talk shows can affect political perceptions positively by priming positive attributes in judgmental processes (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016).

One survey in the US revealed that frequent exposure to radio talk shows increased internal PE in the audience but did not affect cynicism, as measured by indicators similar to those used for assessing external PE (Pinkleton, & Austin, 2001). Other studies provided evidence that watching late-night talk shows increased internal PE (Becker, 2020; Hoffman, & Thomson, 2009). An experiment in the Netherlands examined how a political talk show clip affected trust in politicians (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016). The authors found that only less-informed viewers experienced a decrease in political trust when watching the entertaining talk show clip compared to a journalistic interview in a current affairs program. Indicators of political trust in this study overlapped with those of external PE (e.g., politicians are only interested in votes; politicians lose contact with society). Finally, a study in Israel found that watching non-confrontational and sometimes sympathetic political talk shows increased people's trust in government (Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). However, since the study only measured political trust, it is unclear how internal or external PE could have been affected.

The majority of the previous findings demonstrated that viewing talk shows was positively related to PE. This result may be due to the fact that civil and constructive discourse prevailed in these shows and that hosts were supportive and sympathetic towards politicians who can present themselves favorably (Baum, 2005). When political actors bridged the gap between themselves and the audience and appeared as "one of us," they were likely to create the impression that they were responsive to the needs of the public (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016). When talk show viewing results in an increased salience of positive attributes of political actors, we can hypothesize that frequent exposure to political talk shows increases internal and external PE in the audience (H1).

Divergent results were also observed both within the US and between the US and other countries, for example, Israel and the Netherlands. This variation needs to be examined in order to determine whether these findings are due to differences in talk show content from one country to another.

The Relationship Between the Viewing of Political Humor and Political Efficacy

Political humor encompasses a diverse and rich media environment, including comedy shows, mock news programs, news satire, and sketch-based shows (Becker, 2020; Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather, & Morey, 2011; Moy, Johnson, & Barthel, 2014). This genre often involves jokes about political topics and personalities, featuring film actors, musicians, and other celebrities (Brewer, & Marquardt, 2007; Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003). According to Holbert (2005), there are two sub-genres of political humor: late-night comedy and traditional satire. Both have a strong political focus but differ in political explicitness. Satire is implicit, while late-night comedy may be more explicit in its messages. This distinction may

have consequences in terms of the effects of political humor on the audience (Hoffman, & Young, 2011).

Similar to the effects of political talk shows, political humor shows can potentially affect the political perceptions of the audience both positively and negatively. Previous studies have argued that the simplification of complicated political matters made political failures and successes more understandable and made the personalities of politicians more relatable, potentially boosting viewers' internal PE (Becker, 2020; Becker, & Waisanen, 2013). Supporting this idea, Hoffman and Young (2011) demonstrated that the frequent consumption of political satire, but not late-night comedy, increased viewers' internal PE. Similarly, frequent exposure to satire, e.g., *The Onion*, was positively related to internal PE (Becker, 2011; see also Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013). Finally, a longitudinal survey study found that frequently viewing political satire increased internal PE (Long, Jeong, & Lavis, 2021).

However, most of these studies focused on internal PE and did not examine the impact of political humor on external PE. Recent reviews of research have suggested that humorous political outlets were likely to have a negative effect on external PE (Baumgartner, & Lockerbie, 2018; Becker, & Waisanen, 2013). Baumgartner and Morris (2006), for instance, found that making fun of political candidates and the political process in *The Daily Show* increased internal PE but also increased cynicism in viewers. Another study found that exposure to satirical clips during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign reduced external PE and political trust over time (Baumgartner, 2013). An Israeli study, however, also provided evidence that political humor did not affect internal or external PE at all (Balmas, 2014).

The overall picture that emerges resembles the findings related to political talk shows: Although there were differences across studies from different countries, it can be inferred that exposure to political humor can encourage individuals to participate in the political process (Becker, 2020; Hoffman, & Young, 2011). We therefore hypothesize that the increased accessibility of politics makes frequent consumption of politically humorous media likely to increase internal PE (H2).

There is tentative evidence that some forms of humor, for example, caricatures of political actors and excessive mockery in satire are likely to perpetuate negative stereotypes of public figures that can then reduce external PE or trust in political actors (Baumgartner, 2013; Baumgartner, & Morris, 2006). The hypothesis we can derive from this reasoning is that, due to the increased accessibility of negativity, frequent consumption of political humor in media is likely to decrease external PE (H3).

The Relationship Between the Viewing of Political Drama and Political Efficacy

The content of political fictional entertainment, including political television dramas and movies, has become increasingly popular (Delli Carpini, 2017; Jones, & Paris, 2018; Nitsch, Jandura, & Bienhaus, 2021). The content of dramas such as *House of Cards* (2013–2018) or *The West Wing* (1999–2006) is highly political and realistic, offering insights behind the scenes of politics and addressing political issues, state officials, and institutional politics (Eilders, & Nitsch, 2015). They are often set in real-world locations like the White House (Manoliu, 2019). Programs that are more removed from current affairs, for example, *Game of Thrones*

(2011–2019) or *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–present), can still explore the use and abuse of political power, however, and can influence viewers' political perceptions (Jones, & Paris, 2018).

Previous research has found that fictional television tended to present a negative image of politics, depicting politicians as corrupt and greedy, serving their own interests instead of the public's (Lichter, Lichter, & Amundson, 2000; Moy, & Pfau, 2000). However, other scholars have argued that fictional TV dramas presented political authorities in a positive light (Nitsch, Jandura, & Bienhaus, 2021; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). Similar to the genres discussed earlier, political dramas are diverse, providing viewers with portrayals of politics that can enhance or hinder their understanding, depending on the messages conveyed (Moy, & Pfau, 2000).

The cultivation approach is a prominent theory for the impact of fictional media on the audience (Delli Carpini, 2017; Holbert, 2005). According to Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, (2001), television narratives convey “values about institutions, and through repetition over time, prime-time network series exert an influence on people's perceptions of what is reality” (p. 439). Additionally, research on narrative persuasion has found that viewers frequently confused facts with fiction and drew on information from fictional entertainment when forming actual political beliefs (Mulligan, & Habel, 2013; Mutz, & Nir, 2010). Fictional portrayals of public authorities, for example, politicians or police officers, can therefore shape perceptions of these groups.

Supporting this view, Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, (2001) demonstrated that watching dramas that portrayed public authorities as heroes was associated with positive perceptions of individuals in these roles (see also Moy, & Pfau, 2000). Similarly, positive portrayals of the criminal justice system cultivated positive perceptions of criminal justice in the US, while a negative storyline had the opposite effect (Mutz, & Nir, 2010). Elliott and Schenck-Hamlin (1979) also found that watching the drama *All the President's Men* (1976), which explored the Watergate scandal, increased political alienation in the audience. They gauged political alienation using a combination of internal and external PE items taken from Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, (1954). Similarly, Manoliu (2019) also found that negative depictions of politics in *House of Cards* (2013–2018) increased political cynicism, while positive portrayals in *The West Wing* (1999–2006) reduced cynicism.

One assumption derived from these previous studies is that portrayals of corrupt and self-interested public authorities aloof from citizens can reduce internal and external PE. Conversely, idealized, hero-like representations of political actors are likely to cultivate a positive perception among the audience and have a mobilizing effect. Consumption of such positive fictional entertainment is likely to result in higher levels of internal and external PE.

The literature also contains inconsistent evidence, however, showing that viewing fictional dramas was unrelated to PE or cynicism (Jones, & Paris, 2018; Kaid, Towers, & Myers, 1981). Specifically, Feldman and Sigelman (1985) suggested that watching the movie *The Day After* (1983) did not affect the feeling of powerlessness in the public. Hooghe (2002) likewise found that related forms of narrative entertainment, for example, soap operas and movies, were unrelated to PE. Kaid, Towers, & Myers, (1981) also showed that viewing *Washington: Behind Closed Doors* (1977), which portrayed political actors and events in an unflattering light, did not

affect PE. Finally, watching the dystopian drama *Hunger Games* (2012–present) was unrelated to internal and external PE (Jones, & Paris, 2018).

In summary, previous research has provided an inconclusive picture of the relationship between political drama viewing and PE. Different programs within the same genre have had inconsistent relationships with PE, making hypothesis formation difficult. A more appropriate approach may therefore be to ask how political dramas correlate to each dimension of PE (RQ1).

Methods

Participants

To address the hypotheses and research questions, a comparative online survey was conducted in 18 countries between May 3 and June 24, 2022. The fieldwork was conducted by Kantar/Lightspeed. A sample of $N = 1,500$ participants was drawn from an access panel that recruited participants both offline and online in each of the following 16 countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US. The samples in Switzerland and Belgium included $N = 1,000$ individuals each, as we only sampled from the dominant linguistic regions (German in Switzerland and Flemish in Belgium). This yielded a total sample size of 26,000. The cooperation rate was generally high, ranging between 79% in the US and 95% in Italy. A quality check was implemented to filter out participants who did not read the questions attentively. Countries were selected in which the overlap between genres was sufficient across countries (see also Xenos, Moy, Mazzoleni, & Mueller-Herbst, 2018), allowing us to assume that relationships in one country could be replicated in others. At the same time, differences between the media systems or specific entertainment media used in different countries may be substantial enough to produce idiosyncratic relationships. Observing universal associations of political entertainment genres and external and internal PE despite differences in media systems would enhance our understanding of the effects of political entertainment media beyond country-specific factors or specific situations.

Quotas were implemented for gender, age, and education during the participant recruitment process to obtain a sample that was representative of each country's population. However, a comparison with census data revealed that individuals with lower educational degrees were underrepresented in some countries, i.e., Greece, Norway, Israel, and Sweden. On the other hand, participants with lower educational attainment were overrepresented in the UK, Switzerland, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Belgium. The use of weights to compensate for underrepresentation or overrepresentation of specific groups did not alter the substantive findings, allowing us to conclude that the findings were not biased by a lack of representativeness.

Design and Materials

The original questionnaire was in English. Where available, we used translations of existing scales to create questionnaires for the online survey in all languages. The translations needed were reviewed by experts in each country involved in the project.

The dependent variables in the present study were internal and external PE, which were measured using well-established

short scales that demonstrated sufficient validity and reliability (Groskurth, Niessen, Rammstedt, & Lechner, 2021; Roth, Weinmann, Schneider, Hopp, & Vorderer, 2014). External PE was assessed using the following items: *Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people* and *politicians care about what ordinary people think*. Participants rated their agreement with these statements on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 5 = *completely agree* ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.03$). Internal PE was assessed using the following statements: *I am good at understanding and assessing important political issues* and *I have the confidence to take an active part in a discussion about political issues* ($M = 3.02, SD = 1.01$). An exploratory factor analysis confirmed that the indicators loaded on their respective dimensions. Both scales were sufficiently reliable. The Spearman–Brown coefficients for external PE ranged from 0.65 in Israel to 0.85 in the US. For internal PE, they ranged from 0.58 in the Czech Republic to 0.81 in Italy.

The main independent variables were measures of exposure to political entertainment genres. Specifically, we assessed the frequency of viewing *Political Talk Shows*, *Political Humor* and *Political Drama* by asking participants how frequently they watched programs from each of these genre categories. Participants rated their frequency of viewing on a six-point scale ranging from 1 = *Never* to 6 = *Daily*. We also assessed the frequency of exposure to information about political news and current affairs in six different outlets using the same rating scale. The outlets included *television*, *radio*, *newspapers and magazines*, *news aggregators* (e.g., *Google News*), *social media* (e.g., *Facebook*, *Twitter*), and *messaging services* (e.g., *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*). Descriptive statistics and correlations among the media use variables can be found in [Tables A1–A19 in Appendix A](#).

We also considered demographic and political variables that are known to be associated with internal and external PE (Craig, & Maggionto, 1982). These variables included age (in years; $M = 42.0, SD = 13.1$), gender (52% female, 48% male), education (primary, secondary, and tertiary educational degrees; 33.5% tertiary education), political interest (rated on a scale from 1 = *not at all interested* to 7 = *very interested*; $M = 4.5, SD = 1.8$), and political ideology (measured using a left-right self-placement scale ranging from 0 = *left* to 10 = *right*; $M = 5.2, SD = 2.5$). Each of these variables was assessed using a single questionnaire item.

Results

To examine the relationship between political entertainment genres and external and internal PE, we conducted two multilevel linear random intercept models for each of the dependent variables. In these models, individuals on the first level are nested within countries on the second level. The estimation is based on the restricted maximum likelihood method. All independent variables are modeled as fixed effects. The predictors on the individual level included exposure to political talk shows, political humor, and political drama. We also considered additional media use variables as individual-level covariates, including television, radio, newspapers and magazines, news aggregators, social media, and messaging services. Furthermore, we controlled for age, gender, education, political interest, and political ideology. [Table 1](#) includes the unstandardized and standardized coefficients from these models.

Aligning with H1, we found that frequent viewing of political talk shows was associated with higher levels of external PE ($b = 0.059, SE = 0.006, p < .001$) and internal PE ($b = 0.060, SE = 0.005, p < .001$). Regarding H2 and H3, the consumption of political comedy news or satire was positively related to internal PE ($b = 0.030, SE = 0.005, p < .001$), but not to external PE ($b = -0.003, SE = 0.005, p = .661$). Finally, for RQ1, the study found that political drama consumption was positively related to external PE ($b = 0.032, SE = 0.006, p < .001$), but unrelated to internal PE ($b = 0.004, SE = 0.005, p = .385$).

The standardized estimates demonstrate the strength of these relationships compared to those found for traditional news sources. For external PE, the effect size of talk show consumption ($\beta = .080$) was similar to that of TV news ($\beta = .084$) and twice that of political drama ($\beta = .044$). For internal PE, talk show consumption ($\beta = .087$) was the most important predictor among the media-related variables, followed by newspaper consumption ($\beta = .061$).

The findings from the multilevel models represented averages across all countries. These averages can be the result of relationships that are similar across all countries, but they can also be influenced by specific cases with large associations in one country that are not present in others. The variance of the country intercepts in [Table 1](#) was significantly different from 0 ($p < .01$), indicating differences across countries. A closer examination of the regression models by country ([Figures 1–3](#) and [Tables B1–3](#) in the Appendix) revealed that the relationships were similar in size and that the overall findings are not driven by outliers. Specifically, the most consistent association across countries was found for political talk show viewing. In half of the countries, viewing political talk shows was positively related to external PE, and in 15 countries we observed positive effects of watching political talk shows on internal PE ([Figure 1](#) and [Table B1](#) in the Appendix).

On average, frequent consumption of political humorous media content was positively associated with internal PE, but not with external PE. When examining individual countries, viewing political humor increased internal PE in seven of the selected countries ([Figure 2](#) and [Table B2](#) in the Appendix). However, we found a negative relationship in Denmark, meaning that those who watched more political humor reported lower levels of external PE ($b = -.052, SE = .026, p = .045$). All other effects were negligible.

Finally, more frequent viewing of political dramas was associated with higher external and internal PE. This positive relationship was observable for external PE in Sweden ($b = 0.104, SE = 0.029, p < .001$), the US ($b = 0.083, SE = 0.026, p = .005$), Germany ($b = 0.050, SE = 0.024, p = .040$), Denmark ($b = 0.054, SE = 0.027, p = .049$), and Spain ($b = 0.050, SE = 0.025, p = .049$) and for internal PE in Italy ($b = 0.086, SE = 0.021, p < .001$) and Sweden ($b = 0.049, SE = 0.024, p = .043$) ([Figure 3](#) and [Table B3](#) in the Appendix). For the majority of the countries, however, viewing political dramas was unrelated to PE.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between PE and three different genres of political entertainment in 18 countries and yielded three major findings. First, viewing political entertainment media had a significant impact on both external and internal PE, comparable to that of traditional news outlets, for example, TV news.

Table 1. Relationship Between Frequency of Political Entertainment Media Use and Internal and External Political Efficacy

	External political efficacy			Internal political efficacy		
	<i>b</i> (SE)	β	<i>P</i> -value	<i>b</i> (SE)	β	<i>P</i> -value
<i>Fixed effects</i>						
Intercept	1.502 (0.072)**		<.001	1.139 (0.047)**		<.001
<i>Controls</i>						
Age	-0.009 (0.001)**	-.111	<.001	0.001 (0.004)	.005	.441
Gender (male - female)	0.073 (0.014)**	.036	<.001	0.201 (0.011)**	.103	<.001
Education (medium)	-0.009 (0.019)	-.005	.624	0.091 (0.016)**	.047	<.001
Education (high)	0.102 (0.021)**	.048	<.001	0.189 (0.017)**	.094	<.001
Political interest	0.012 (0.005)*	.019	.015	0.255 (0.004)**	.430	<.001
Ideology (left-right self-placement)	0.002 (0.003)	.006	.380	0.005 (0.002)*	.012	.034
<i>News use</i>						
TV	0.070 (0.006)**	.084	<.001	-0.005 (0.005)	-.006	.350
Radio	0.020 (0.006)**	.025	.001	-0.009 (0.005)	-.012	.059
Newspapers	0.074 (0.006)**	.090	<.001	0.047 (0.005)**	.061	<.001
News aggregators	0.018 (0.006)**	.023	.003	0.005 (0.005)	.007	.308
Social media sites	-0.012 (0.006)	-.016	.067	0.001 (0.005)	.001	.876
Messaging services	0.098 (0.006)**	.128	<.001	0.005 (0.005)	.007	.360
<i>Political Entertainment Use</i>						
Political talk shows	0.059 (0.006)**	.080	<.001	0.060 (0.005)**	.087	<.001
Comedy news/ Political satire	-0.003 (0.006)	-.004	.661	0.030 (0.005)**	.043	<.001
Political Dramas	0.032 (0.006)**	.044	<.001	0.004 (0.005)	.006	.385
<i>Random Effects</i>						
Var. Intercept (Country)	0.059 (0.020)*		.030	0.014 (.005)*		.013
Var. Residual	0.915 (0.008)**		<.001	0.626 (.006)**		<.001
-2 Restricted Log Likelihood	-29,605.925			-25,546.670		

N = 26,000; ** *p* < .01 * *p* < .05.

Second, the impact of different genres of political entertainment on PE varied. The strongest and most consistent relationship was found between political talk show viewing and both dimensions of PE. Regular viewers of political talk shows reported higher levels of perceived responsiveness of politicians and a greater belief in their ability to make a difference in the democratic process. This result aligns with previous research (Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999; Tsfti, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). Additionally, the positive impact of talk show viewing on internal PE was not unique to the US, as similar results were found in other countries. This finding mirrors previous work on the mobilizing impact of viewing political talk shows (Becker, 2020; Hoffman, & Thomson, 2009). Based on these results, it can be assumed that most political talk shows tend to be constructive and issue-oriented, avoiding excessive negativity and norm violation that can lead to alienation (Forgette, & Morris, 2006; Mutz, & Reeves, 2005). This civil discourse can provide a better understanding of political life, resulting in higher perceived responsiveness and increased political engagement (Schuck, 2017). The format can also give political actors the opportunity for strategic self-presentation, improving their image in the public (Boukes, & Boomgaarden, 2016; Tsfti, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009).

For comedy news or political satire, the findings were less consistent. In over a third of the countries, frequent viewers reported higher levels of internal PE, which confirms previous

evidence (Becker, 2011; Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013; Hoffman, & Young, 2011; Long, Jeong, & Lavis, 2021). This suggests that the genre can provide political information in an accessible and comprehensive way, leading to increased understanding and engagement in politics (Becker, 2011; Hoffman, & Young, 2011). However, these effects were smaller than those found for the relationships between talk show viewing and internal PE and, in the majority of countries, were not significant. This could be due to differences in political humor across countries or differences in susceptibility to political humor among audience members.

In most countries, exposure to political humor was unrelated to external PE, which is consistent with a study conducted in Israel (Balmas, 2014). One way to explain the absence of an effect could be that mockery or caricature of politicians is less prevalent in most countries. Another explanation is that people were not affected by political humor, even if it portrayed political actors in an unflattering light.

In Denmark, we observed a negative effect of watching political humor on external PE. This was similar to findings in the US (Baumgartner, 2013; Baumgartner, & Morris, 2006), but was not replicated in the U.S. sample in the present study. However, the effect in Denmark was weak and comparable to other negligible coefficients of the same sign. Another interpretation suggested by Long, Jeong, & Lavis (2021) is that this negative effect could be seen as constructive skepticism, rather than a cynical response.

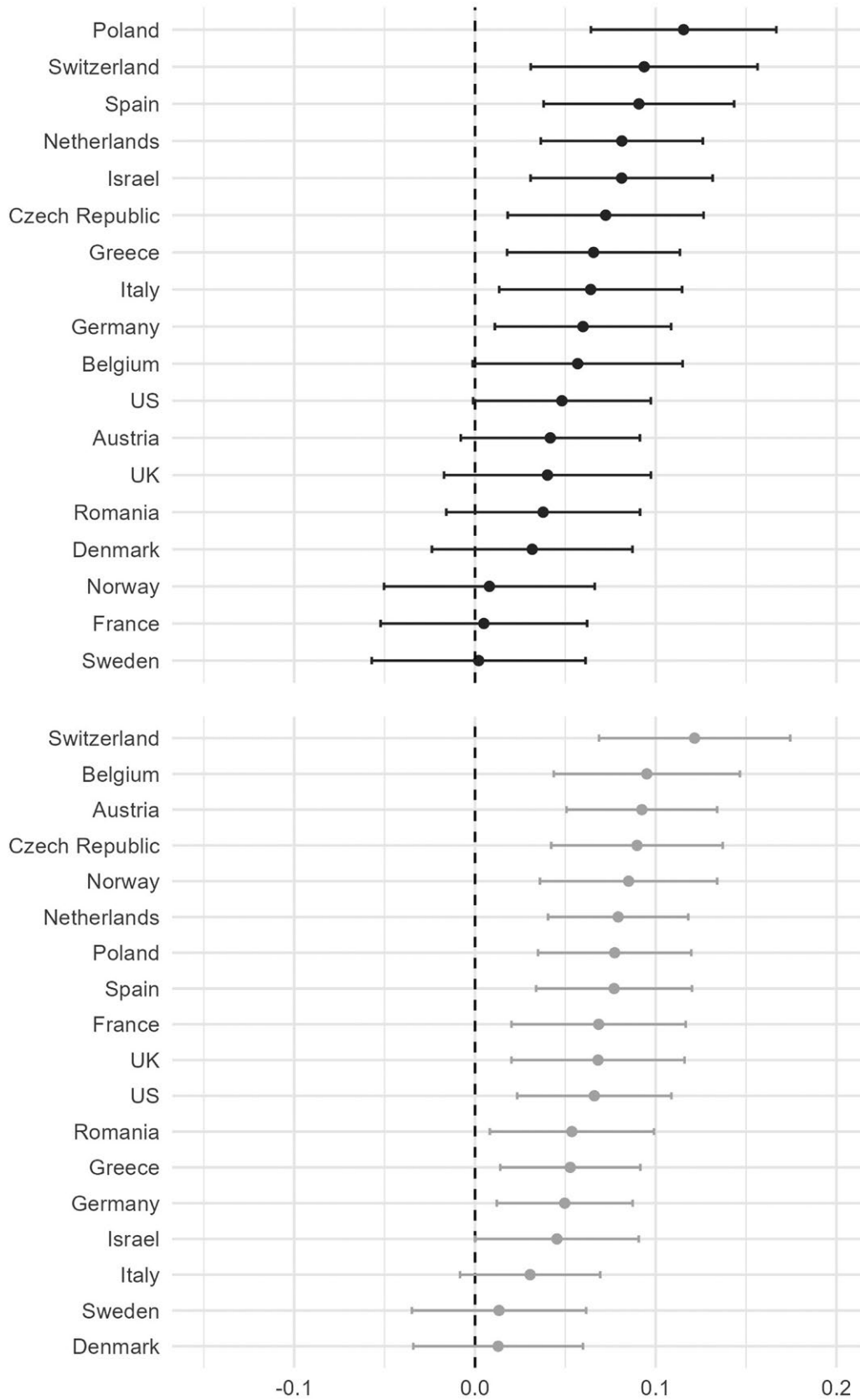


Figure 1. Relationship between frequency of talk show viewing and external (top panel, black) and internal political efficacy (bottom panel, gray; unstandardized coefficients from country-specific regressions that included the same covariates as before).

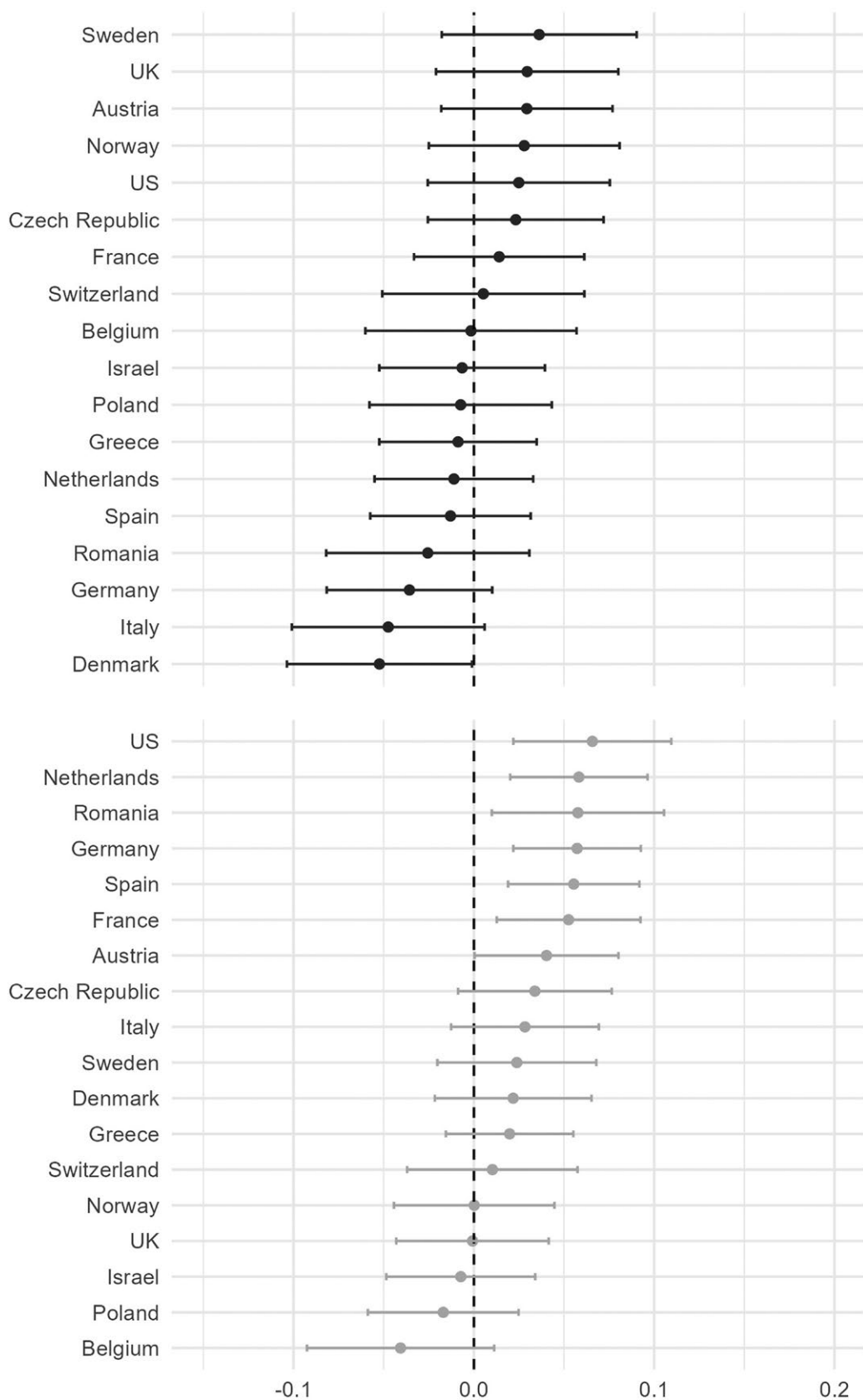


Figure 2. Relationship between frequency of consumption of political humor and external (top panel, black) and internal political efficacy (bottom panel, grey; unstandardized coefficients from country-specific regressions that included the same covariates as before).

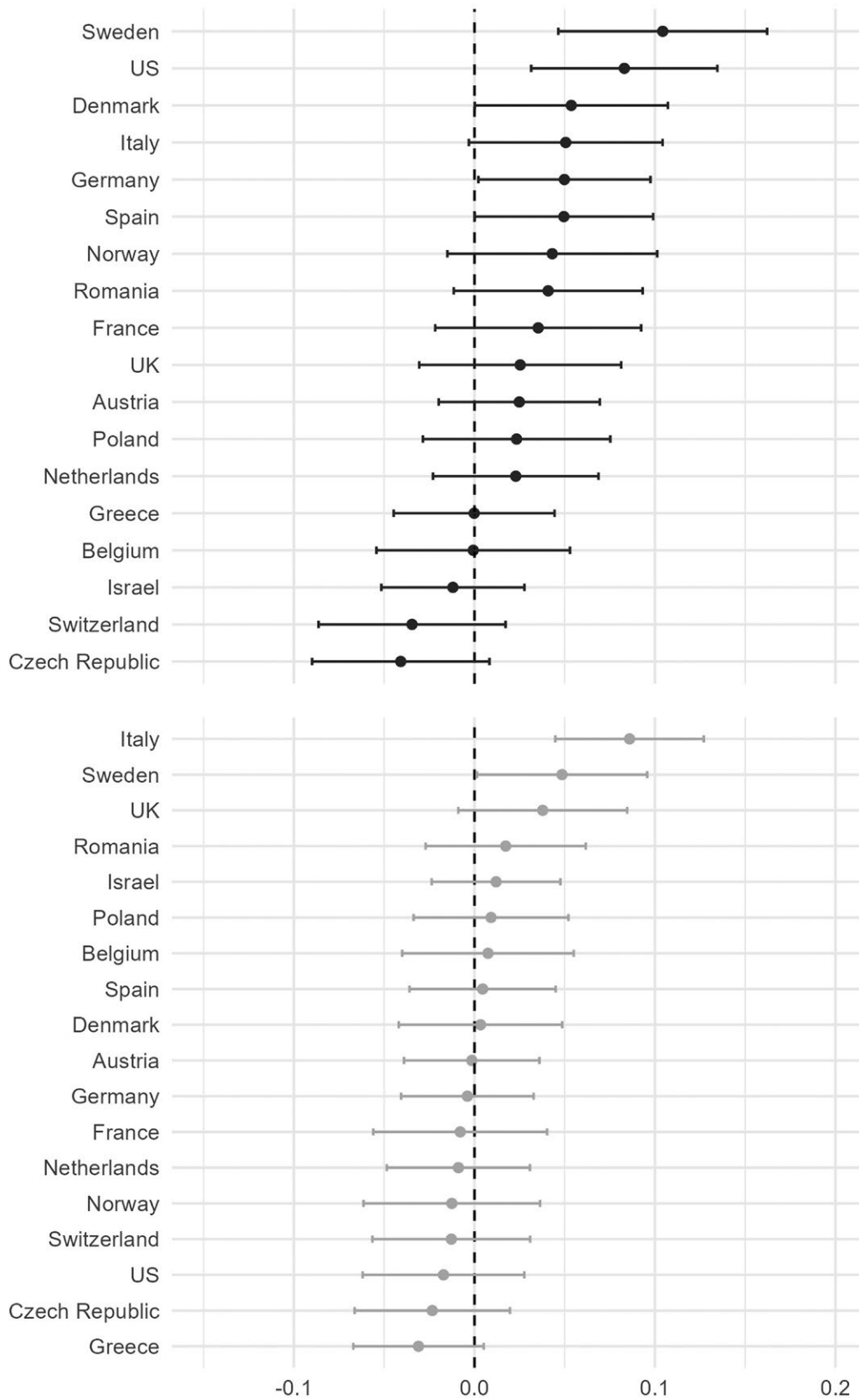


Figure 3. Relationship between frequency of political drama viewing and external (top panel, black) and internal political efficacy (bottom panel, grey; unstandardized coefficients from country-specific regressions that included the same covariates as before)

Third, the relationship between PE and watching political dramas was weaker, as only a few countries showed a positive association with external PE, and even fewer showed an association with internal PE. In a quarter of the countries, viewing political dramas increased external PE, which supports previous evidence (Manoliu, 2019; Mutz, & Nir, 2010; Pfau, Moy, & Szabo, 2001). This could be because audience members in these countries were exposed to entertaining fictional narratives that portrayed politicians in a positive light or made their experiences relatable. As a result, this positive perception may have influenced their views of real politicians (Mutz, & Nir, 2010). However, this spill-over effect did not lead to an increase in internal PE. This suggests that fictional media narratives are more likely to impact external PE, which relates to perceptions of others, such as politicians, rather than internal PE, which pertains to one's own motivation to engage in real political life. These findings align with research on cultivation effects, which has consistently shown stronger effects on perceptions of others compared to perceptions of oneself (Hermann, Morgan, & Shanahan, 2021).

Another important question concerns the finding that, in most cases, viewing dramas was unrelated to either internal or external PE. Although this null result replicates previous studies (Hooghe, 2002; Jones, & Paris, 2018; Kaid, Towers, & Myers, 1981), there may be two explanations for the absence of relationships. First, it is possible that the dramas lacked mundane realism and relevance to current political life. Feldman and Sigelman (1985) also argued that mediated entertainment that was remotely related to current affairs was unlikely to affect people's perceptions of politics, including internal and external PE. Viewers of shows like *Hunger Games* (Jones, & Paris, 2018) or soap operas (Hooghe, 2002) were therefore less likely to be affected than audiences of docudramas that address real-life events, such as the Watergate scandal (Elliott and Schenck-Hamlin, 1979)).

Another explanation suggests that positive and negative relationships between drama consumption and PE may have balanced each other out. In other words, the overall null relationship may be the result of a positive and a negative relationship of similar magnitude, both stemming from viewing positive and negative portrayals in political dramas. It is difficult to determine which of these explanations applies based on the present data. The only conclusion we can draw is that the relationship between watching political drama and PE does not follow a universal pattern.

Taken together, the differences in findings between countries may be due to variations in the entertainment programs watched, the reference objects (i.e., the actual politicians to whom specific external PE findings apply), sampling variability, or a combination of these factors. This lack of consistency mirrors the variation in findings from previous single-country studies. It is important to note that these inconsistencies were not unique to entertainment genres but also applied to traditional news outlets. Frequent exposure to newspaper news, for instance, had the strongest and most consistent positive effect on both external and internal PE across countries. Disaggregated by country, we observed this relationship in 13 out of 18 countries for external PE. Regarding the relationship between TV news use and external PE, we found positive correlations only in ten countries. The findings are similar for internal PE. This suggests that the pattern of results is not specific to entertainment genres but also applies to news outlets. Single-country studies that demonstrate a relationship

between media use and criterion variables thus cannot be generalized to other populations without additional assumptions.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the study only examined three political entertainment genres and did not consider additional entertainment media genres that could also be related to PE. Political documentaries, reality TV shows, cartoons, video games, and novels can also have potential political effects (Tsfati, & Walter, 2017). It is important to consider this aspect of genre differentiation from a comparative perspective as well. Future comparative research could therefore assess how frequent exposure to a broader range of entertainment genres is related to internal and external PE across countries.

Second, since this study was cross-sectional, it cannot establish causality or examine the dynamics of the relationships. Evidence regarding selective exposure to politically entertaining content has been reported (Tsfati, & Walter, 2017) that the present research could not take into account. Future comparative research should use longitudinal data to study the dynamic interplay between political entertainment media and PE. Comparative experimental studies examining the causal mechanisms in more detail may be fruitful as well.

Finally, because it examines the relationships between entertainment media and PE in a broader sense, this study cannot determine the mechanisms that drive these associations. For instance, we do not know if frequent viewing of political satire increases people's understanding, thereby increasing internal PE (Becker, 2011; Hoffman, & Young, 2011). We are also unable to infer that it is the civility of the discourse or the self-presentation of politicians in talk shows that affect external PE in individuals (Mutz, & Reeves, 2005; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). Understanding these processes requires the assessment of the specific mediators for a direct test. Studying these mechanisms from a comparative perspective would also be valuable in order to examine the universality of the relationships between entertainment and PE.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our study suggests that entertainment media convey politically relevant information and influence viewers' real-world perceptions of politics. These programs may vary in their connection to current affairs and in how explicitly they address this connection. Additionally, individuals may even rely on fictional content when forming political judgments and making decisions. Scholars in the fields of public opinion and political communication should therefore recognize that the public obtains information from various nontraditional sources, which can have a wide range of effects. At the same time, more research on cross-cultural differences is needed, focusing both on the differences in media content as well as on the ways in which viewing these programs is related to political engagement.

Funding

This project (file number 462.19.449) is financially supported by the NORFACE Joint Research Programme on Democratic Governance in a Turbulent Age and co-funded by FWO, DFF,

ANR, DFG, NWO, NCN, AEI, and ESRC, and the European Commission through Horizon 2020 under grant agreement No 822166.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary materials are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

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