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Pathway to Political Participation: The Influence of Online and Offline News Media on Internal Efficacy and Turnout of First-Time Voters

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Abstract

News media play a key role in informing young citizens about politics and cultivating a sense of political efficacy. Online news media, in particular, are expected to have a positive impact due to their interactivity and new opportunities to share and discuss information. This study analyzes the impact of online and offline news media use on the growth in internal efficacy among adolescents, based on data we collected in a three-wave panel survey in the Netherlands ($N = 729$). Additionally, we test the impact of internal efficacy on turnout using a fourth wave of the same sample ($N = 612$). The results show that while newspaper reading has the strongest effects among traditional news sources, actively participating in the communication process of political information online has the strongest impact on internal efficacy. Internal efficacy in turn is found to be a significant predictor of first-time voters. The article concludes with a discussion of media use as a pathway to political participation through internal political efficacy.

Keywords

political participation, online media, offline media, first time voters

To many teenagers and adolescents the political world appears to be a very complicated place. So complicated, in fact, that they have the impression that they are not qualified

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or competent enough to participate in it. The decrease of internal political efficacy among the youngest generation is often seen as a serious threat for democracy (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Social scientists have therefore devoted a considerable amount of work to gain insight into how adolescents can learn about politics in order to feel competent enough to turn out and vote (Beaumont, 2010; Delli Carpini, 2000).

In the discussion about potential solutions to the problem, media, in particular new media, play a key role as they can provide relevant information about political actors and processes and foster to the political understanding of their users. After all, citizens of the youngest generation are the first *digital natives* and have ample skills to search, read, react to, and create political messages on the Internet. Moreover, in many European countries access to the Internet for this generation is almost universal. In the Netherlands, for example, 95% of 15- to 25-year-olds use the Internet on a daily basis (Dutch Office of Statistics [CBS], 2013).

There is some empirical evidence that indicates that Internet use, internal political efficacy, political participation, and turnout of adolescents are indeed connected (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). However, most of these studies are based on cross-sectional data or small scale experimental research. This article adds to the existing research in two ways. First, by relying on panel survey data we collected over the course of 2 years, we do not investigate the level of internal efficacy at a fixed point in time but rather, the *change* in the dependent variable over time and its potential causes. This way, our study answers a recent call for a longitudinal perspective on the phenomenon (Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011).

Second, we do not look at the Internet as an isolated source of information. Instead, this study includes classic information sources, such as newspapers and TV news as well as new media sources of information, to find out which of these sources contribute to the development internal efficacy. By providing an integrated analytical model of a typical political information diet of an adolescent and its effect on internal political efficacy, we also contribute to the academic debate on sources of political efficacy in a theoretical way. Finally, we provide evidence that internal political efficacy has a strong impact on electoral participation in the same sample, arriving at a comprehensive analysis of the pathway from adolescent news media use to political participation.

Digital Natives and Internal Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is at the core of beliefs and values needed to participate in a democratic society. It is a personality trait acquired early in life and influences the degree to which citizens participate in politics throughout their lives. Therefore, determinants and mechanisms leading to the development of “the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about the change” (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1971, p. 187) have been the focus of research for the past 60 years in political science and psychology alike (Beaumont, 2010). The concept can be distinguished into two dimensions: *external efficacy*, which is primarily dealing with the “responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizens’ demands” (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991, p. 1408), and *internal efficacy*, defined as beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to

participate effectively in politics” (Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1408). Closely related to the latter dimension is *information efficacy*, a concept put forward by Kaid and colleagues (2007) that describes citizen voters’ confidence in their own political knowledge.

Mass media, in particular newspapers, have been found to play an important role in the development of political efficacy among young citizens in the past (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). By watching news on TV and reading about the political world in daily newspapers, adolescents familiarize themselves with political actors and processes and build political knowledge (Delli Carpini, 2000; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Over the course of years they become increasingly confident about their skills to participate in politics and reach sufficient levels of political efficacy.

However, political information in the mass media does not reach a large share of the youngest cohort anymore. According to some scholars, declining numbers in newspaper readership among young readers, decreasing interest in TV news (Huang, 2009), and dramatic gaps in political knowledge (Kaid et al., 2007) are symptoms of the same disease. The youngest generation—in the words of Mindich (2005)—is “tuned out” from the traditional news.

Others argue that adolescents have not tuned out but found a new arena of political information: the Internet. This is not simply a shift of information source; political information on the Internet can be a completely different experience due to its social (Bennett, 2008) and interactive (Tedesco, 2007) quality. To the youngest generation, who is familiar with the social character of information on the Internet, a news item is more than an event shown on the media, it is something that can be shared, forwarded, commented on, or remixed (Coleman, 2008).

In the context of explaining *growth* in internal political efficacy this is an important notion. Previous studies have shown that talking about political events encountered in the news is a much better predictor on outcome variables of political involvement than mere exposure to the news (Shah et al., 2009). This is due to the way adolescents process political information. During conversations about abstract political processes with peers, parents, or teachers, they make sense of what happened and encounter potential interpretations of the events. Of course, events reported in traditional news media can spark political discussions as well, but on the Internet, a political debate is more accessible. Articles usually allow readers to comment and engage in a debate with other readers, they can be shared on a social network site (SNS) with minimal effort, and hyperlinks provide the opportunity to either find out more about the subject or even participate online, for example, by signing an online discussion. Moreover, conversations can be started without the need to be at the same place at the same time. Finally, to the youngest cohorts, who spend a significant share of the day on social media, sharing and talking online about something they have encountered is a standard way to deal with information (Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011).

However, despite growing empirical support for the causal mechanism connecting use of online political information and internal efficacy (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; Tedesco, 2007), the positive effects on adolescents are still hard to trace on a large scale in the field (Boulianne, 2009; Esser & de Vreese, 2007). If effects of political communication are found, other sources of information

like newspapers and TV were omitted from the model and the effects are rather small (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006). This might be a consequence of limited interest in political online participatory media among adolescents (Bakker, 2013) and the countless opportunities to select information that is welcome and even personalize news sources in a way to avoid unwanted (political) news.

Hypotheses and Analytical Model

In order to study effects of news media on internal political efficacy and participation, it is important to take into account all aspects relevant to the process. An integrated model should include measures of usage of traditional sources of political information, TV news and newspapers, as well as online sources of political information.

Hypothesis 1: News use has a positive effect on internal efficacy.

Hypothesis 1a: Use of TV news has a positive effect on internal efficacy.

Hypothesis 1b: Use of newspapers has a positive effect on internal efficacy.

Hypothesis 1c: Use of online news sources has a positive effect on internal efficacy.

Moreover, we need to not merely include a measure of Internet usage, but differentiate what it means: simply reading an article or actively engaging in a political discussion by forwarding or commenting on it (civic messaging) (see also Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). In the latter case a much stronger effect is to be expected as the communicative process inspires information processing and taking a stance on political issues, thereby empowering young citizens (Tedesco, 2007). According to the communication mediation model by Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005), these effects could even fully mediate effects of online political information sources.

Hypothesis 2: Civic messaging has a positive effect on internal efficacy.

Internal Efficacy as a Driver of Political Participation

A decrease in electoral political participation among the youngest generation has raised concerns both in the scientific and political world. Though the United States has witnessed a recent increase in turnout among the youngest voters, the general trend is toward diminishing participation. In Europe, the past few elections were characterized by an increasing abstinence of young citizens from the ballots. In the Netherlands the turnout rate among voters younger than 25 has dropped by over 20% in the past three elections (Dutch Office of Statistics, 2013).

According to the research of Kaid and colleagues (2007), this can be attributed to a lack of internal political efficacy or information efficacy. Especially the youngest generation feels that they lack the competence and knowledge to make an electoral decision. Given that internal efficacy is highly predictive of political participation among adults as well (Clarke & Acock, 1989; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002), we expect to find

that those who feel confident about their political knowledge and understanding are more inclined to turn out at the first elections in which they are eligible to participate.

Hypothesis 3: Internal efficacy has a positive influence on the likelihood to turn out at the first elections.

Method

In order to investigate the influence of differential media use on internal efficacy, we rely on a three-wave panel survey conducted in the Netherlands between 2010 and 2012 among a sample of adolescents aged 15 to 18 at the beginning of the survey. To test the effect of internal efficacy, a fourth wave was added directly following the general election taking place in the Netherlands in October 2012.

Sample

The sample was drawn from a population representative database administered by a Dutch opinion poll institute, GfK, using a light quota sample. The quotas used were age (15 to 18), gender, and education. In the first wave, 1,653 respondents participated (June 16 through July 10, 2011). In the second wave, 1,186 of those respondents also participated (June 16 through July 10, 2011; attrition rate: 28%). The third wave took place from June 14 to July 3, 2012. Eight hundred eighty-eight respondents participated in the third wave (attrition rate: 25%).

The fourth measurement took place from September 14, 2012 to September 24, 2012. Seven hundred forty-six respondents participated in the final wave (attrition rate: 16%). Panel attrition did not lead to a significant change in the composition of the panel with regard to key demographic variables of age, gender, and education.

Measures

News use. Three different modes of news use are included in the model explaining internal efficacy: TV news use, newspaper use, and Internet news sources. All items concerning news use are measured as exposure to a specific news outlet in days per week (1 to 7). To achieve a parsimonious model, measures of use of specific news outlets are combined by calculating the mean per mode of news. For TV news use we combined use scores of the main evening news broadcast in public and commercial TV ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .03$). Internet news use is a combined a measure of use of a webpage of a newspaper, webpage of a TV news show, or use of the main online only news source in the Netherlands (nu.nl) ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .03$). Newspaper use was assessed by combining exposure scores to national quality newspapers or regional newspapers ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .03$).

Civic messaging. To assess the level of civic messaging, we rely on a scale of items measuring participation in any of the following forms of political online communication

($M = 0.18$, $SD = .004$): post a political message or video on a social network site, chat or (micro)blog about politics, sign an online petition, participate in an online discussion, start an online discussion about politics, organize an online petition, join a political cause on a SNS, forward an e-mail with political content, and e-mail a politician. All items were measured on a 3-point scales (*never, sometimes, often*) ($\alpha = .80$). A factor analysis was carried out to ensure that the scale is one-dimensional.

Internal efficacy. Internal efficacy was measured using the standard item: "Sometimes politics seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." It has been a standard item in the internal efficacy scales used in the American National Election for decades (Niemi et al., 1991) and is also used as a single-item indicator in large scale surveys like the European Social Study or the Norwegian election study. The item was measured on a 7-point scale ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .03$).

Turnout. Turnout at the first elections is assessed as a binary measure of self-reported behavior. In order to decrease over-reporting of turnout, the questionnaire offered three different categories to report nonparticipation ("normally I am voting, but this time I could not make it"; "I thought about voting, but this time I did not do it," and "I have not voted"), which were later recoded into one category.

Controls. Age, gender, and formal education were added to the model as control variables. Education is measured by type of school that the respondent is currently attending or has attended in the past (low, middle, or high).

Analysis

To make optimal use of the panel data, we rely on random effects generalized least square estimation because it is the most efficient form estimation and provides the opportunity to control for relevant background factors. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, a Hausman test was carried out that yielded no significant differences between fixed and random effects model ($p > .01$). The advantage of this approach is that instead of predicting a *level* of internal efficacy at a given point in time, as a cross-sectional or auto-regressive model would, this model predicts *change* in the dependent variable over time based on change in the independent variables (e.g., if adolescents start reading a daily newspaper or start engaging in online discussions more frequently). This means that we can test causal relationships in a more valid and conservative way.

However, this approach forecloses to test a full model of media use, internal efficacy, and turnout, as the latter variable is only measured once. We therefore split the analysis in a panel model predicting change in internal efficacy and a model that predicts turnout on with internal efficacy as the main predictor. Moreover, measures of news use were not included in the final wave of the panel, implying that a full model would need to be based on lagged independent variables. We therefore test the effect of internal efficacy on turnout using a minimal, parsimonious model. To ensure

Table 1. Random Effects Panel Model Results Predicting Change in Internal Political Efficacy Using Generalized Least Square Estimation ($N = 729$ individuals in 3 waves).

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	SE	B	SE
Intercept	2.63**	.56	1.53**	.58
TV news use	0.03	.02	0.03	.02
Online news sources use	0.06*	.02	0.01	.02
Newspaper use	0.09**	.02	0.05*	.02
Education	0.40**	.10	0.39**	.10
Gender	-0.47**	.10	-0.49**	.10
Age	0.01	.03	0.005	.03
Civic messaging			1.29**	.19
p	.45		.45	
Wald χ^2	69.96**		116.95**	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

reliability of the results, the model is retested including an inclusive set of known factors of internal efficacy that have been measured during the third wave, 3 months prior to the elections.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the panel data regression analysis explaining change in internal political efficacy. The first model only includes the use of the three kinds of news sources: TV news, online news, and newspapers as well as control variables. When comparing the three modes of news use it becomes apparent that newspaper usage is the strongest and most significant predictor of internal political efficacy. TV news use has no significant impact on the dependent variable, whereas the usage of online news sources is predicted to have a slightly significant effect on internal political efficacy. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is partially confirmed by our analysis. Both online and offline news media contribute to rising levels of internal efficacy, with the exception of TV news.

However, this effect disappears once civic messaging is added to the model (Model 2), implying that active online political communication mediates the effect of political information obtained online. Looking at the second model it also becomes clear that civic messaging is by far the most important predictor in explaining an increase in internal political efficacy over time. Our analysis therefore supports the proposition of Hypothesis 2.

Turning to the effect of internal efficacy on the likelihood to participate in the first elections, we find strong support for Hypothesis 3 in our data (Table 2).¹ As it becomes apparent from Table 2, internal efficacies is a key driver of turnout. If young voters

Table 2. Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Turnout ($n = 612$).

Predictor	B	SE B
Internal efficacy	0.46**	0.10
Age	0.07	0.15
Education	0.58*	0.30
Gender	0.35	0.28
Intercept	-2.0	2.6

Note. χ^2 : 31.08**.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

feel only a little more efficacious, measured in one item step on a 7-point scale, the odds to turn out and vote increase by nearly 50%.

Discussion

In this article, we analyzed how news use and civic messaging can contribute to the growth of internal efficacy in a period that is crucial for the development of political skills, namely, the 2 years leading up to the first general election. The effects of the different sources are not tested in a vacuum, but in an integrated model of political communication relevant to the age group. This allows us to compare the influence of the different sources and reliably attribute effects to the correct source.

Our results show that for young citizens, acquiring confidence in their competence to participate in the political system by using political information is not a simple, straightforward process. Whether or not news use contributes to internal political efficacy depends on (a) the type of medium in which political information is presented and (b) the level of involvement. According to our data, newspaper reading is still the most effective information source with regard to the development of internal political efficacy. These results are in line with research dating back as far as the 1970s as well as recent studies on the effect of news use on political knowledge and engagement (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Esser & de Vreese, 2007). Given the downturn in newspaper readership in the past decennia, especially among the youngest generation, these findings raise concerns. If TV and Internet news sources cannot replace the informational value of newspapers, how will future generations acquire the confidence in their competence to participate in the political process?

Our analysis provides a partial answer to this question. According to our results, digital natives are indeed best informed through the Internet. However, this is under the condition that they assume an active role in the communication process. If adolescents are part of message construction, be it by engaging in an online discussion or merely by forwarding a political message to their peers, their level of internal political efficacy rises significantly. The effect is stronger than the effects of usage of any of the more passive form of news, including newspapers. These results fit well into the communication mediation model proposed by McLeod, Shah, Hess, and Lee

(2010). By communicating about political messages interpersonally, be it online or offline, adolescents process information and become more engaged. Yet, as promising as these findings are, our data also show a key problem, which is that civic messaging is not widely spread. Less than 15% of our sample has ever engaged in civic messaging. Compared to the wide reach of TV news (over 80% report to watch TV news at least once a week), this is a rather small share. Given that watching TV news has no significant impact on an increase in internal efficacy, we can conclude that a large share of young adults today does not use news media in a way that fosters internal political efficacy. This might explain the declining levels of turnout among young voters in Netherlands and elsewhere in recent years (Dutch Office of Statistics, 2013). On the other hand, these results also indicate that European adolescents are not as “tuned out” as their American counterparts (Mindich, 2005). Even though it had no impact on change in internal efficacy, at least over 80% report to follow the news on TV on a regular basis.

Turning to the effect of internal efficacy on turnout, our results echo a recent finding from the United States (Glasford, 2008): Internal efficacy is a key driver of turnout in elections at a young age. As political involvement in the first elections has a strong socializing effect (Sears & Valentino, 1997) and predetermines political engagement throughout the life course, it becomes apparent why understanding the pathway to political participation is so important. If young citizens are socialized in a way that leaves them feeling competent enough to make an electoral decision when it is their first time to vote, they are likely to become engaged citizens throughout their life.

The models presented in this article are based on panel data we collected over the course of over 2 years. This has advantages as well as disadvantages. One of the main disadvantages of collecting panel data among such a young age group is that the panel attrition is relatively high. Over the course of 2 years we have lost more than half of our respondents. And even though that has not led to a significantly different demographic composition of the panel, we cannot be certain that there is no significant systematic attrition with regard to our dependent and independent variables. On the other hand, panel data provide the unique opportunity to study change in a dependent variable rather than a status at a specific point in time. Hence, if a relationship is found, we can be confident that it is not a spurious correlation caused by a third unobserved variable. If we had analyzed just a singular wave of our study, we would have found strong significant relationships of all of news use variables and internal political efficacy.

A 2-year time frame during late adolescence (age 16 to 18) provides an interesting insight into political socialization processes during formative years. However, we know that the process of political socialization starts at a much younger age and continues throughout the life course (Sears & Levy, 2003). In order to get a full picture of the processes and mechanisms, future research should extend the longitudinal scope even more.

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Note

1. Given the small N , we chose to present a parsimonious model, including only a few key control variables here. A model based on an inclusive list of control variables (political interest, social economic status, parental education, mobilization through others, and general media use) was also estimated and yielded no different results with regard to significance level and size of the effect. These control variables were measured during the third wave 3 months prior to the elections.

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