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### Context in political communication : measurement and effects on political behavior

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## Chapter 3

### Consonant and dissonant information exposure

Effects on electoral participation



## **Abstract**

Recent studies indicate that party-political cross-pressures (exposure to information that is dissonant with one's own attitudes) may demobilize citizens, whereas exposure to consonant information may enhance the likelihood to turn out and vote. This chapter studies the applicability of this theory with respect to attitudes towards the European Union. It examines the relationship between these attitudes, exposure to news that is consonant or dissonant with these attitudes, and voter participation in elections to the European Parliament. To test the effect of consonant and dissonant information exposure on electoral participation, the study employs survey data from the European Election Study 1999. It focuses on Britain, where newspapers can be classified clearly in terms of their pro-or anti-European stances. The analyses show that consonant and dissonant information exposure does not have a significant impact on participation in European elections, when relevant variables are controlled for. In the concluding section, implications of the findings will be discussed.

## Introduction

Does exposure to information that is dissonant with one's own political attitudes obstruct electoral participation? Recent studies indicate that party-political cross-pressures (exposure to party-political information that is dissonant with one's own party-political attitudes) may have a demobilizing impact on citizens, whereas exposure to consonant information (exposure to party-political information that is compatible with one's own party-political attitudes) may enhance the likelihood to turn out and vote (Brynin & Newton, 2003; Mutz, 2002). Mutz (2002) found that persons whose interpersonal networks generate exposure to political disagreement have a lower vote intention at Presidential Elections in the US than those whose networks yield exposure to more homogeneous political information. Brynin and Newton (2003) found similar results for exposure to the mass media in the UK. They found support for the notion that persons who read a newspaper that matches their party-political preferences are significantly more likely to turn out at general elections than those who read a paper that provides information not compatible with their party preferences.

This chapter investigates the effects of consonant and dissonant newspaper exposure on electoral participation. It differs from previous chapters because it considers other variables than party-political preferences and the partisan direction of the information one is exposed to. In this way, it strongly reduces the contamination of results from self-selection effects, an argument that I will elaborate below.

## Consonant and dissonant information: effects

Why would exposure to dissonant information demobilize voters? Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet (1944) argued that persons who are subject to 'cross-pressures' (those who are exposed to interpersonal or mass-media information that does not conform with their own political attitudes) experience more internal ambivalence than others. Ambivalence involves shifting political judgments, which makes that ambivalent persons take substantially longer than relatively one-sided (unambivalent) persons to reach a crystallized voting intention (Lavine, 2001). Alternatively, ambivalent persons may solve the internal inconsistencies by not voting (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Janowitz & Marvick, 1956; Lavine, 2001; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Mutz, 2002), resulting in lower probabilities to vote for persons who experience dissonance through the media or interpersonal communication (Brynin & Newton, 2003; Mutz, 2002).

Conversely, why would exposure to information that is consonant with one's own party-political attitudes enhance electoral participation? Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) argued that persons who are exposed to different information sources that provide similar information will be reinforced in their political predispositions. Exposure to political information that is consonant with one's own predispositions generates stronger and more stable political preferences and reduces ambiguity of political opinion building (Miller, 1991; Newton & Brynin, 2001; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999; Patterson, 1998; Voltmer, 2000). Consequently, it reduces the time required to reach a

crystallized voting intention and increases the likelihood to turn out (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Newton & Brynin, 2001).

The effect of consonant and dissonant mass media exposure was tested by Brynin & Newton (2003) for the British case. They studied the combined effect of individuals' exposure to specific newspapers and (the direction of) their own party identification on participation in national parliamentary elections. On the basis of a large-scale survey, they found support for the notion that persons who read a paper that matches their party-political preferences are significantly more likely to turn out at general elections than those who read a paper that does not match their party preferences.

However, Brynin & Newton's (2003) study may be marred by self-selection effects. People (partly) choose newspapers on the basis of their party-political preferences (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis, 1990; Newton & Brynin, 2001; Norris et al., 1999; Weibull, 1995), which makes them different from others from the start. The media exposure effects that Brynin et al. (2003) claim to have found may therefore be reader effects in reality. Despite the fact that the authors controlled for a number of political characteristics there may be other differences between those who are subject to consonance and those who experience dissonance that are not captured by their control variables. In other words, the two groups may be composed of persons with different political characteristics that are not controlled for. If that were to be the case, the validity of the interpretations may be jeopardized.

One way to reduce this possibility of self-selection effects is to look at topics that are unlikely to play a role in newspaper selection. One such topic is people's attitude towards the European Union. At the same time, this is a topic that may polarize newspapers (Baker, 2001; Peter, 2004) as well as citizens (Baker, 2001; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004), which is a premise for testing consonance and dissonance effects. If newspapers do not polarize on the issue, and instead apply a rather balanced way of reporting on the topic, outspoken situations of consonance or dissonance will not exist. Attitudes towards the European Union are correlated with electoral participation in elections to the European Parliament (Blondel, Sinnott, & Svensson, 1998). In Great Britain, newspapers and citizens are rather polarized on pro- or anti-European stances (e.g., Anderson & Weymouth, 1999; Seymour-Ure, 2002), which makes Britain an excellent case for testing consonant and dissonant exposure effects<sup>38</sup> in the context of European elections. Because

<sup>38</sup> Although there is overlap between the British newspapers' party-political bias and European stances – with Labor newspapers predominantly favoring Europe and Conservative papers mainly reporting with a Eurosceptic slant –, the pro-Labor tabloid with the largest reach, the Sun, has a consistent Eurosceptic tone (Anderson & Weymouth, 1999). Besides that, pro- and anti-European stances can be found both among Labor and Conservative sympathizers. Although Labor sympathizers in general are more positive towards the EU than Tory voters, pro-European stances as well as Euroscepticism are present among both. 39% of the Conservative voters in the European Parliament election of 1999 considered the EU a 'good thing', 31% considered it a 'bad thing', and 30% replied it was 'neither good, nor bad'. Of the Labor voters, 71% considered it 'good', 5% 'bad', and 24% 'neither'. (Source: European Election Study 1999). The fact that European stances cut across party-political divisions is important because it greatly weakens the possibility of self-selection effects.

reading of newspapers is widespread in Britain (Newton & Brynin, 2001; Worcester, 1995)<sup>39</sup>, they can be used as a relevant source of political information.

Participation in *European Parliament* elections is selected because at least until 2001, the issue of Europe was not very salient in national parliamentary elections (Carey & Burton, 2004). In the context of European Parliament elections, however, attitudes towards the EU are more likely to be triggered (Blondel et al., 1998; Niedermayer, 1990). Combining these various considerations leads to the following hypotheses:

*H1: Reading a newspaper that is consonant with one's attitudes towards the EU has a positive effect on electoral participation in elections to the European Parliament.*

*H2: Reading a newspaper that is dissonant with one's attitudes towards the EU has a negative effect on electoral participation in elections to the European Parliament.*

I expect these effects to occur, irrespective of the direction of the attitude towards the EU that one holds. Figure 1 illustrates these hypotheses in terms of the variables involved.

**Figure 1** Hypothesized electoral participation at the elections to the European Parliament, by newspaper readership and attitudes towards EU

Type of exposure	Negative attitude towards EU	Positive attitude towards EU
Eurosceptic newspaper	<i>Consonance</i> High level of participation	<i>Cross-Pressures</i> Low level of participation
Pro-European newspaper	<i>Cross-Pressures</i> Low level of participation	<i>Consonance</i> High level of participation

When testing these hypotheses it must be kept in mind that additional variables may impinge on the dependent variable, or may interact with the variables depicted in Figure 1. Consequently, they have to be included in the analyses as well. Effects of consonance or dissonance of information may vary according to readers' levels of information. For persons who are politically uninformed, exposure to dissonant information may, as argued above, cause ambivalence and a smaller likelihood of voting. For politically knowledgeable persons, however, exposure to dissonant information may enhance informedness. They will not easily experience ambivalence because their political preferences are more stable (e.g., Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). For politically informed persons, exposure to dissonant information may even *increase* knowledge and thus the likelihood to vote. Therefore I expect the following.

<sup>39</sup> Obviously, most people are exposed to multiple sources of information, as they also watch television news, listen to the radio, read political information in magazines and on the Internet, etc. As it cannot be expected that all these sources are fully consonant, exposure to other sources will affect (i.e., underestimate) newspaper reading effects.

*H3: Dissonant information will affect participation negatively if one is not politically informed while it will either have no effect or a positive effect for well-informed readers.*

This hypothesis implies a negative interaction effect of exposure to dissonant information and political informedness.

For consonant reading, I expect the opposite. Consonance is more likely to be helpful for those, who are not so much politically informed. For those who are very much informed, the positive impact will be smaller as they have a high probability to vote already. This leads to the following hypothesis.

*H4: Consonant reading will affect participation negatively if one is politically well informed and positively if one is not politically informed.*

According to the hypothesis, I expect a negative interaction effect to occur for consonant reading and politically informedness.

In order to control as much as possible for possible self-selection effects, I will not only look at electoral participation in the 1999 European Parliament elections but also at electoral participation in the 1997 general election. Saliency of EU topics was larger in the 1999 election to the European Parliament than in the 1997 national parliamentary election (Carey & Burton, 2004). Therefore, the hypothesized exposure effects can be expected to be more pronounced in the elections to the European Parliament than the election to the national parliament. The effects described in H1 and H2 should actually be absent for the national election. Were I to find such an effect anyway, it would indicate a reader self-selection effect rather than an exposure effect. I expect the following:

*H5: Cross-pressure and consonance with respect to EU-attitudes has stronger effects for electoral participation in the European Parliament election than in the national parliamentary election.*

## Data and method

To test these hypotheses, I used data from the British part of the European Election Study 1999 which contains records from 977 completed interviews (see Appendix A for additional survey information). This large-scale telephone survey was conducted among citizens of age 18 and over immediately after the election to the European Parliament. The data set includes a battery of questions tapping readership of newspaper titles. In addition, the data set contains information on attitudes towards the European Union. In combination with the content analysis data documented by Anderson & Weymouth (1999), these data provide the possibility to determine for each respondent whether she is subject to newspaper information that is consonant, dissonant, or neither with respect to the attitudes about the EU. The survey includes also indicators of other factors that are likely to affect electoral participation, such as political attitudes and preferences and

socio-demographic characteristics. These allow controls for possible intervening or spurious effects.

British national newspapers can be classified according to their pro- or anti-EU biases by using the results of Anderson & Weymouth (1999). They analyzed the long-term discourses on issues concerning the EU in the national daily newspapers in two periods. The first captures the eight-week period preceding the general election of 1997 (March-April 1997). The second focuses on the discourse of the press at four important events during the British EU presidency (January-June 1998). It is important to note that their findings are not isolated in time, as their definition of discourse refers to events in the past that will recur in discourse after the periods that are analyzed. This implies that readers who do not change newspapers, are exposed to long-term and cumulative pro- or anti-EU newspaper contents. Anderson & Weymouth (1999) concluded that two broadsheets and three tabloids structurally apply a discourse of Euroscepticism: *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Express*, the *Mail* and the *Sun*. The pro-European press consists of three broadsheets, that is the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, and the *Financial Times*, and one tabloid, the *Mirror*. Exposure to consonant or dissonant newspapers is based on combining the information of newspaper readership in the survey with these findings by Anderson & Weymouth (1999). The notion that EU-biases of newspapers are long-term and cumulative in character is supported by a study by Seymour-Ure (2002), who analysed the editorials of the main British newspapers on their attitude towards the EU in 2001. He found the same pro-and anti-European biases as discussed above, except for one paper<sup>40</sup>.

In order to strengthen conclusions about the effect of consonant or dissonant information upon voter participation, relevant variables that also affect participation must be controlled for. Ignoring these variables might result in spurious effects. The factors that I will control for are:

- Number of days of reading a newspaper. The consonance and dissonance factors under study both consist of a combination of the variables ‘newspaper readership’ and ‘attitude towards the EU’. Therefore, both of these effects need to be controlled for, in order to avoid attributing explaining variance to consonance or dissonance, whereas in reality it might belong to readership or attitude.
- Attitude towards the European Union. I control for this variable because it is part of the consonance and dissonance variables – see the first bullet above.
- Social class. Social class is an important variable to take into account since newspaper readership partly reflects the division of the middle and working class that exists in Britain (Worcester, 1995). Class also affects voting behaviour in a positive way (Franklin, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> The Daily Express, in his analysis, applied a pro-European bias in the editorials in 2001. However, according to the same author, this paper applied a sceptical slant in 1997. In the absence of more detailed data I coded the Express as anti-EU in 1999.



- Age<sup>41</sup>. Controlling for age is necessary since older persons are more likely to vote (Franklin, 1996, 2004) as well as to read a newspaper (e.g., Lauf, 2001).
- Political interest. Many studies have indicated that politically interested people are more likely to vote than people who are not interested (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Therefore, political interest is considered as a control variable.
- Political knowledge. Persons with higher levels of interest are more likely to vote and to read a newspaper. Price and Zaller (1993) found that general political knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of one's ability to process political information. Omitting this variable from the analysis may result in an overestimation of the exposure effects. I indicated political knowledge by using a question on the attention that is paid to news about Europe. The question wordings of variables are described in Appendix G.

The dependent variable in this study, participation in the election to the European Parliament is measured as follows:

*A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections on June 10 while others voted. Did you cast your vote?*

Respondents' attitudes towards the EU are indicated by their responses to the following question:

*Generally speaking, do you think that Britain's membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?*

Combining responses to this latter question with the EU-slant of the newspaper that people regularly read, yields the distinction between consonant and dissonant information. The group of people that is neither exposed to consonant or to dissonant newspapers is the reference group for the analyses; consonance and dissonance are both contrasted to this group. The three groups (consonance, dissonance, neither) contain 670 respondents<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Originally, I also considered education. However, this variable did not significantly affect participation, nor did it have an influence on consonant or dissonant information exposure. I left this variable out of further analyses because of its minor influence and the large amount of missing cases and persons that were 'still in education'.

<sup>42</sup> This 'neither' group includes three types of people, namely people who do not read a paper and/or people who think the EU is 'nor good, nor bad', or people who do not have an outspoken opinion on the EU (the value on the good/bad variable is missing). People who read a paper that is not indicated as pro- or anti-European, are excluded from further analyses, as the contents of these papers is not known. The number of cases is well below the 977 respondents that the data set yields for Britain, because persons who read a paper that is not identified as pro- or anti-EU in the study of Anderson et al. (1999) are excluded, along with persons who read both anti-and pro-EU papers.

## Results

Table 1 shows participation percentages for the groups that are distinguished<sup>43</sup>. The final row in the table shows that people in the consonant condition have a higher turnout rate of 15 percentage points, compared to people in the dissonant condition. This result is in accordance with expectations. Participation levels among people who do not read a paper are lowest: only 34% of people who do not read a paper at all turned out and voted. This might reflect an effect of political disinterest: lacking interest causes people not to read a newspaper on the one hand and not to turn out and vote, on the other.

Persons, who read a paper that is consonant with their negative attitude towards the EU, participate most (54%). The group of persons reading news that is consonant with their positive EU evaluations also have a relatively high likelihood to participate in the EU election: 49% of them voted. The cross-pressured groups show the lowest participation levels (as expected): 37% of persons with a positive attitude that is cross-pressured by their paper participated, and 40% of persons with a negative attitude that is cross-pressured did so (although this latter group only consists of ten persons). Turnout percentages are related to newspaper reading: those who read a paper that is consonant with their attitude towards the EU are significantly more likely to vote in elections to the European Parliament than those who are cross-pressured by their paper (Pearson's chi-square=8.00; df=3; Pr=.046). The fact that turnout is almost the same in all rows, indicates that the consonance effect is not stronger or weaker according to the attitude towards the EU. In other words, consonance and dissonance are independent of the EU-attitude.

Turning back to the column 'no paper', a substantial difference exists between turnout levels among those who think Europe is a 'good thing', and those who think it is a 'bad thing' of 19 percentage points. It indicates that in the case that people do not read a paper, the backgrounds are heterogeneous. This implies that one should control for such background variables in further analyses, something that will be done below. For now, the preliminary analyses of Table 1 support hypotheses 1 and 2.

**Table 1** Participation levels by newspaper readership and attitudes towards EU, n in parentheses

	Consonance	Cross-pressures	No paper	Total
EU 'good thing'	49% (75)	37% (181)	39% (64)	40% (320)
EU 'bad thing'	54% (79)	40% (10)	20% (25)	45% (114)
Total	52% (154)	37% (191)	34% (89)	42% (434)

In order to test hypothesis 5, I also analyzed the association between cross-pressures, consonant exposure, and recalled vote of the last national parliamentary election (which took place in 1997). I did not find evidence for a cross-pressure or consonance effect of atti-

<sup>43</sup> The total number of cases in this table is below 670, because the group that thinks "Europe is neither good nor bad", or who did not answer this question, is not included in this table.

tudes towards the EU on participation in the general election (Pearson's chi-square=3.44; df=3;  $P=0.328$ ). This result is in accordance with hypothesis 5, and it confirms the notion that these circumstances of cross-pressures and consonance do not matter for national parliamentary elections. More importantly, it confirms the idea that the effect on participation in the EU election is not an artefact due to self selection effects that would have rendered the composition of the groups involved incomparable.

The analysis of Table 1 showed different participation levels for consonant and dissonant exposure in elections to the European Parliament, without controlling for other variables that can be expected to affect the dependent variable, electoral participation. Controlling for those factors requires a different mode of analysis. Table 2 shows the results of logistic multiple regression analyses of participation in the European election of 1999. Consonant and dissonant information exposure are included as two dummy variables, contrasted to the base-category 'other' (which, obviously is not included). 'Other' refers to people who are neither cross-pressured, nor reinforced. This comprises people who think Europe is 'neither good, nor bad' or did not answer this question, and those who do not read a paper (in total 325 people<sup>44</sup>). From the analyses are excluded respondents who read a paper of which the EU-slant is unknown, and those who read both pro-European and anti-European papers. Table 2 presents three models, all explaining electoral participation. The first model in the table comprises two independent variables, consonant exposure and dissonant exposure. It indicates that it is the group exposed to consonant information that is significantly more likely to vote than others: persons who are strengthened in their attitude towards the EU by their paper are more likely to participate. The coefficient of the cross-pressures dummy is not significant, which indicates that exposure to dissonant information does not demobilize people to go and vote.

The second model of Table 2 includes a number of necessary controls, as explicated above. These include the variables reading a newspaper and attention to news about Europe, as well as age and social class. The coefficient of the consonance dummy has been reduced, and is no longer significant. The dissonance (or cross-pressure) effect remains insignificant; however, this coefficient is now in the expected direction. Age, social class, and also attentiveness to news about Europe and general political interest affect electoral participation in a positive way, as expected<sup>45</sup>. The degree of exposure, as indicated by the number of days per week that one reads a newspaper, does not exert an additional effect on participation.

<sup>44</sup> 195 people who think EU is 'neither good, nor bad', 41 people who didn't answer the 'EU good/bad thing' question, 89 people who do not read a paper.

<sup>45</sup> 'EU bad thing' and 'EU good thing' did not affect the dependent variable, and not the independent variables under study, either. Therefore, these two variables are left out of the analysis.

**Table 2** Logistic regression of electoral participation (EP election, 1999) on consonant and dissonant information exposure, controlled for socio-demographic background and political attitudes. Cell entries are regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Type of newspaper exposure			
Consonance	.832 (.200)***	.357 (.250)	.556 (.729)
Cross-Pressures	.229 (.191)	-.191 (.243)	-.860 (.798)
Political interest		.561 (.137)***	.565 (.137)***
Media use and attentiveness			
Nr. of days reading paper		.021 (.035)	.019 (.036)
Attention to news abt Europe		.364 (.112)***	.327 (.154)*
Attention * consonance			-.064 (.245)
Attention * cross-pressures			.229 (.264)
Socio-demographic background			
Social class		.313 (.098)***	.316 (.098)***
Age		.029 (.006)***	.029 (.006)***
Constant	-.754 (.119)***	53.815 (12.329)***	53.234 (12.353)***
Variance explained (McFadden pseudo R <sup>2</sup> )	.020	.153	.154
n	670	596	596

\*p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001

Model 2 would imply a rejection of hypotheses 1 and 2, and the research on which those hypotheses were based (Brynin & Newton, 2003; Mutz, 2002). Before settling that conclusion, however, I want to ascertain whether this finding is not an artefact in itself. I can think of two potential objectives against this model. The first is that the non-significance of the effects of consonance and dissonance could be due to heterogeneity of effects for different groups, which, if not distinguished, would result in opposite effects canceling each other out. Such heterogeneity may conceivably exist with respect to political interest, so that the effects of consonance and dissonance would be different for high and low interest groups. To check for this possibility, I specified model 3, which adds to model 2 two interaction terms: the interaction of cross-pressures and attentiveness and the interaction of consonance and attentiveness. Estimating model 3 demonstrates, however, that this heterogeneity argument does not explain the nonsignificance of the main effects of consonance and dissonance. None of the parameters are significant. For the other parameters, the results as described for model 2 remain the same.

A second potential objection to model 2 and its findings would involve the question whether that model controls for too many other variables, so that the 'thunder' is stolen of the variables of interest (consonance and dissonance). I think that this is not the case. Variables that should be controlled for include all variables that are antecedent in the causal factor of interest, and that are correlated with this factor and/or the dependent variable (see King, Kehoane, & Verba, 1994). One should not control for variables that are

(causally) located between the putative cause and the dependent variable. When inspecting the control of model 2, these rules are not violated, and therefore there is no basis for objections on the basis of over-controlling.

### Conclusion and discussion

Recent studies have claimed that exposure to information that is consonant with one's own attitudes mobilizes to participate in elections, whereas information that does not conform to one's own attitudes has a demobilizing effect. This study elaborates on these findings and tries to overcome problems of self-selection, by looking at attitudes and contexts that for most people are unlikely to be linked to their choice of newspaper. The study looked at peoples' attitudes towards the EU in combination with the pro-or anti-EU stances of the newspaper they read, and the effects thereof on electoral participation.

A first analysis seems to support the hypothesized positive consonance and dissonance effects. However, controlling for other relevant variables, consonance and dissonance are shown to have no significant effects. Neither H<sub>1</sub> nor H<sub>2</sub> are supported by the data. There are two possible explanations for these findings. Firstly, the findings might indicate that there are no sizeable consonant and dissonant information exposure effects in the population under study. One could, of course, assert that the sample is too small, and that a larger sample would have resulted in significant effects, an argument that Zaller (2002) uses when reviewing many negative findings in communication research. This argument may be correct, yet it is far from comforting. Larger samples will, *ceteris paribus*, yield more significant effects, but that is a statistical truism. The important question is whether significant effects are sufficiently large to warrant any serious attention when constructing theories or making predictions. When looked at from that perspective, the results reported in Table 2 do not lend much credence to the argument that the sample was too small to detect as significant interestingly large effects.

Trying to save the major hypotheses by marshalling on heterogeneity arguments is not promising either. I expected politically uninformed persons to be more negatively affected by cross-pressures than informed persons. No evidence for this notion was found, (see model 3, Table 2) which results in a rejection of H<sub>3</sub>. I expected informed persons being less positively affected by consonance than less informed persons. I did not find evidence for this notion, leading to H<sub>4</sub> not being accepted.

The fifth hypothesis is accepted, i.e. differences in participation for consonant and dissonant information exposure were not found in any form or shape for electoral participation in the General Election of 1997. This indicates that the relationship between newspaper reading and participation in the elections of the European Parliament is not due to self-selection effects.

The only conclusion that can be drawn from the analyses and discussion is that there are no sizeable effects of exposure to consonant or dissonant information after appropriate controls have been included in the analysis. This generates doubts about the validity of recent research on which these hypotheses were based. As discussed, those studies

are vulnerable to self-selection contamination (which could be avoided in this study), and they may well be wanting in including appropriate controls.

The last decade there has been a lot of debate on the potential demobilizing effects of news on civic engagement and participation. Negative news and tabloidization would, according to several scholars, promote political cynicism, and erode trust and electoral participation. Many studies – mainly American – suggest that these new, common journalistic practices indeed have a negative impact on civic engagement (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). Sabato (1991) found that exposure to frenzies in the press results in political cynicism. Patterson (1993) argued that the news media's interpretative style and emphasis on conflicts makes people more cynical about politics. Cappella & Jamieson (1997) reported that strategic frames also elevate political cynicism. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) found that 'attack advertising' demobilizes the public, which would be reflected in lower participation levels. Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon & Valentino (1994) argued that an overall negativity towards candidates and parties may cause low electoral participation. Fears of 'media malaise' effects are also echoed in Europe; yet, the evidence for such demobilization effects in Europe is weak (Holtz-Bacha, 1990). Several European studies even show the opposite: reading broadsheets and watching television news seems to mobilize people (Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000).

This study does not provide any support for the 'media malaise' or 'demobilization' thesis as described above, either. Persons who were reinforced by their paper in their negative attitude towards the EU, were even most likely to turn out and vote. There is a difference with the US, however. Britain offers a wider variety of choice options than the US. In European Parliament elections there is a possibility to vote for dissent parties such as the UK Independence Party. This is what many in the condition of negative newspaper-negative opinion did: 23% of them voted for the UKIP, compared to 6% of the total British sample. It may therefore very well be possible that the presence or absence of mobilizing or demobilizing effects of media contexts is itself dependent on yet another contextual variable: the variety of choice options available. Further investigation of that possibility, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

