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Context in political communication : measurement and effects on political behavior

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Chapter 4

Causal mechanisms explained

The MPP effect on participation dissected



Abstract

In Chapters 1 and 2 of this study I demonstrated the existence of a relationship between partisanship in the media (Media-Party Parallelism, or MPP) and electoral participation. This relationship was interpreted as a causal one, in which the causal mechanism involves individuals' party identification as an intermediating variable. Moreover, the findings in those chapters suggested that the effect of MPP on electoral participation even applies to people who are not directly exposed to media by way of a two-step flow of communication (which involves interpersonal political discussion). This chapter tests these two hypotheses, using comparative data from the 1999 European Election Study. The tests are conducted with structural equation modeling. Party identification and political discussion are modeled as mediators between MPP and electoral participation. The analyses support the interpretation that these variables act as mediators, without, however, absorbing the entire direct effect of MPP on participation – which suggests that additional mediators exist that have not yet been identified.

Introduction

This chapter extends the analyses of the effects of Press Party Parallelism on electoral participation that were presented in Chapters 1 and 2 of this study. The concept of Press Party Parallelism (PPP) was first introduced by Seymour-Ure (1974) to indicate the extent of partisanship of a press system. Such partisanship is mostly reflected in a party-political or ideological slant in the newspaper contents – particularly in its editorial and opinion pages, but conceivably also in its reporting. The origins of this partisanship may be located in close organizational ties, or shared general values and ideological orientations between newspapers on the one hand and specific political parties or ideologically defined families of parties on the other (Voltmer, 2000). In Chapter 1, I demonstrated that the concept of Press-Party Parallelism (PPP) can be fruitfully extended to include not only the printed press, but also electronic media that are of importance in political communication, television in particular. This resulted in the more general concept of Media-Party Parallelism (MPP). In the European context, media partisanship was found to be particularly pronounced in the Mediterranean countries and Flanders, and to be particularly low in Finland, Ireland and Germany (Chapter 1). Across the member states of the European Union – the set of countries analysed in Chapter 1 – the strength of MPP varies considerably. These findings are in accordance with a somewhat more impressionistic account by Hallin and Mancini (2004) who argue that press party parallelism is still a relevant characteristic of many West-European media systems. Moreover, I found in Chapter 2 that the strength of such partisanship in media can also vary over time within a single country, as was exemplified in analyses pertaining to Sweden over the period 1979-2002.

The relevance of press partisanship and media partisanship is that they can be assumed to influence other phenomena, such as political attitudes and behavior. It has been ventured that such partisanship may reduce uncertainty of political opinion building (Voltmer, 2000), strengthen party adherence (Newton & Brynin, 2001), and increase voter turnout (Brynin & Newton, 2003). One particular kind of effect of press/media partisanship was investigated in Chapters 1 and 2, namely the impact on citizens' participation in elections. The analyses in these chapters demonstrated a positive effect of MPP on individual people's propensity to turn out and vote. The estimated effect is unlikely to be an alias for omitted variables, as the model included a series of individual and contextual variables relevant for electoral participation. Although the analyses of these chapters thus showed that media partisanship has relevant consequences, the analyses did not reveal the causal mechanism that expresses itself in this effect.

Because of their nature, it is unlikely that media exert a direct effect on electoral participation, but indirect effects instead, that are mediated through other variables such as cognitive and attitudinal factors (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002). This argument is even more to the point when considering media partisanship – which is abstract and not immediately observable. Additionally, media effects may be brought about indirectly via two-step flow processes of communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). If these indirect effects were neglected or not adequately specified in the analysis, the relationships between the exogenous and endogenous variables may

easily be misconstrued (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). The analyses presented in Chapters 1 and 2 have thus been successful in demonstrating the existence of effects, but not in illuminating the pathways by which they are generated and, conceivably, not in disambiguating the causal importance of the independent variables included in those analyses. The main aim of this chapter is to extend the analyses of these earlier chapters in order to clarify these remaining concerns. In this chapter I will take mediating variables into account and thereby, to the extent that they are of relevance, open up the 'black box' of the effects of media context (MPP) on electoral participation.

Theory and hypotheses

A review of the literature leads to two different hypotheses about the causal mechanism between media partisanship on the one hand and electoral participation on the other. One suggestion, already discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, is that media partisanship (or MPP) positively affects party identification. As a consequence, MPP may indirectly influence electoral participation, as party identification has a positive effect on participation (e.g., Brynin & Newton, 2003; Voltmer, 2000). Several studies have demonstrated that exposure to partisan slanted media contents from television, newspapers and radio has a positive impact on partisan identification and on preferences for the candidate of one's 'own' party (Bartels, 1993; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hofstetter, Donovan, Klauber, Cole, Huie, & Yuasa 1994; Jones, 2002; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Zaller, 1996). Evidence has also been found that exposure to partisan news not only increases (already existing) party identification, but also elevates the probability to vote for that specific party and, by implication, enhances the probability to turn out to vote (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Brynin & Newton, 2003; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Newton & Brynin, 2001; Rokkan & Torsvik, 1970). When looked at in conjunction, these studies suggest that the effect of partisan news contents on the probability to turn out which was documented in Chapters 1 and 2, is at least to some extent mediated by individual party identification.

Another proposition is, that the MPP effect on participation is indirect, and mediated by interpersonal political communication, mainly in the form of political discussion. This idea stems from one of the findings in Chapter 2, which holds that even people, who are not regularly exposed to any newspaper, are affected by media partisanship; the positive MPP-effect on electoral participation was found to apply to everybody, irrespective of newspaper reading. This implies that such exposure not only affects the readers or viewers, but also their friends, colleagues, or family if those engage in political discussion with readers and viewers. In such a way, an individual-level effect may result in an aggregate-level effect (Franklin, 2003), via two-step flow processes of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The more that people talk with others about political topics for which they rely on mass media contents, the larger the total impact of those contents on social action, such as electoral participation (Chaffee, 1986). Partisan information will flow from readers to nonreaders, thus also impacting the latter. The existence of such processes has been demonstrated by, e.g., Paek, Yoon, & Shah (2005) who found that

local news has an impact on community participation, for readers *as well as for nonreaders*. Two-step flow communication phenomena can turn initial individual-level communication effects into aggregate-level effects. In more formal terms, Chapter 2 demonstrated that attention to political news in papers does not moderate the effect of MPP on participation. Whether this finding can be interpreted as reflecting a two-step flow of communication will be tested in the remainder of this chapter, along with a test of the hypothesized role of partisan identification as a mediator, as discussed above.

In short, the literature discussed above implies two different but not incompatible (hence potentially complementary) causal processes:

- a) The causal mechanism involves individuals' party identification; i.e. high levels of media partisanship increase and strengthen individual party identification which, in turn, positively affects participation;
- b) The causal mechanism involves political discussion; i.e. in a context of high media partisanship political discussion strengthens individual party identification even of people who are not directly exposed to political news in the media.

These two considerations yield a hypothesized model of electoral participation – or causal theory – that is represented in Figure 1. The arrows represent causal influences (in the direction indicated by the arrow). The figure shows the hypothesized indirect effects of MPP on participation, involving the two mediators discussed above: party identification and political discussion. The model includes a range of other variables at the individual and the aggregate level that – for reasons already elaborated in Chapter 1 – are expected also to affect electoral participation, and that – in order to prevent an improperly specified model – should thus be taken into account as controls (for the relevance of these variables in this respect, see, e.g., Dalton, 1996; Franklin, 2006; Oppenhuis, 1995; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). The hypothesized model contains three blocks of variables distinguished in terms of causal order. The first block consists of exogenous variables, which are displayed at the left-hand side of the figure. Each of these can affect each of the other variables directly, and/or indirectly via mediating variables. Second, party identification and political discussion are endogenous variables that are expected to exert effects on other variables; hence they function as dependent and independent variables. Third, electoral participation is an endogenous variable that is expected to not affect any of the other variables in the model. The two intervening variables are of central importance for several reasons. Party identification has been a core variable for the explanation of electoral participation ever since *The American Voter* was published in 1960 (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). In that study and ever since, people with strong partisan identification were found to be more likely to vote than others. This has given this variable a central role in the explanation of electoral participation (e.g., Blumler, 1983a; Cho, 2005; Franklin, 2004; Moon, 1992; Powell, 1986; Schmitt, 1990). According to much of this literature, party identification mediates the effects on electoral participation of many of the variables portrayed as exogenous in Figure 1. I will briefly elaborate each of these relationships when discussing the exogenous variables, below.

The other variable that has a mediating function in the model is political discussion. Huckfeldt & Sprague (1995) found that contextual political information (in this study:

MPP) is conveyed through a variety of informal social mechanisms, one of which is political discussion (also see, e.g., Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Gunther, Puhle, & Montero, 2007; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Political discussion affects participation, because, according to Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996), discussion about politics is a condition for meaningful citizen participation in politics, a view that is also supported by McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy (1999). But political discussion can also be expected to affect participation indirectly, via party identification. Talking about politics increases party identification because people are more likely to talk with people holding similar party-political preferences, or, more generally, similar political ideologies (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

The block of exogenous variables consists of three contextual variables: concurrent national elections, compulsory voting, and MPP. These three variables are defined as exogenous because they simply cannot be influenced by the individual-level attitudes and behavior that are displayed more towards the right-hand side of the figure. The same argument applies for the exogenous variables age and religion. The remaining variables—attitude towards the EU, political interest, political efficacy, and exposure to political news—are less of ‘naturally’ exogenous nature when modeling individual behavior. These variables and their relationships to the mediating variables and to participation will be discussed below.

The occurrence of concurrent national elections. In the model, I hypothesize an effect of simultaneous national and European elections on participation and political discussion. Both effects are a consequence of the nature of European elections as second order national elections (Marsh, 1998; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Van der Brug, Van der Eijk, & Franklin, 2007; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Blumler (1983b) noticed the domestic nature of European elections already in 1979, when the first elections to the European Parliament took place: in the EU-9 countries, the majority of the electorate voted for domestic reasons (p.321). Not much seems to have changed in this respect (Van der Brug & Van der Eijk, 2007). A concomitant of the second-order character of European Parliament elections is that they have low saliency in the media and in the public’s mind, leading to low levels of interest, discussion, and participation. In the event, however, of concurrent national parliamentary elections, saliency increases leading to more interest and discussion, and higher participation.

Age. I expect a positive effect of age on participation and on party identification, as such effects are among the most often replicated findings in the literature. Older people are more inclined to vote than younger ones (e.g., Blumler, 1983a; Delli Carpini, 2000). Moreover, older people tend to have stronger identifications to a party (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Budge, Crewe, & Farlie, 1976) and thus higher levels of electoral participation.

Compulsory voting. The presence of compulsory voting has an obvious effect on electoral participation (Niedermayer, 1990; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Replicating such an effect is of little interest in itself, but not controlling for this variable will result in a not well-specified model, which risks that its effects will (incorrectly) be attributed to other variables.

Attendance of religious services. A consistent finding in western political contexts is that religious persons are significantly more inclined to vote than non-religious people. The positive effect of religion has been found in many studies (e.g., Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Franklin, 1996; Jones-Correa & Leal, 2001).

Attitude towards the European Union. According to the literature, a supportive attitude towards the EU is likely to (positively) affect political discussion and participation. Firstly, as Van der Eijk (1984) demonstrated, supportive attitudes towards the EU and European integration are very strongly linked to supportive attitudes towards politics in general. This makes them likely to be (positively) linked to political discussion, and thus, indirectly, on electoral participation. Secondly, positive attitudes towards the EU are sometimes reported to have a (small) positive effect on participation by themselves (Blumler, 1983a; Niedermayer, 1990; Blondel, Sinnott, & Svensson, 1998).

Exposure to political news. I expect this variable to positively affect party identification, political discussion and participation. Mutz & Martin (2001) showed that people tend to expose themselves to information that is similar to their own (ideological) orientations, a process better known as selective exposure, implying that people tend to avoid cognitive dissonance (Janowitz & Marvick, 1956). Therefore, exposure to political news may strengthen pre-existing orientations, including party identifications. One could argue that the self-selection mechanism would necessitate a reversal of the direction of the arrow in the causal diagram in Figure 1. I doubt the plausibility of such a reversal, however. It has to be kept in mind that each relationship specified in the model does not exist in isolation, but in the presence of all other relationships. Thus, any relationship between exposure to political news and party identification exists in addition to relationships between each of these and political interest. In view thereof, it is less plausible that the effect would run from a specific and directional variable such as party identification to a more generic and non-directional variable such as exposure to political news. In any case, I expect this effect to have a positive sign. Concerning the effect on political discussion, I expect that exposure to political news positively affects the frequency of talking to friends, family and acquaintances about politics, an expectation that is supported by findings reported by McLeod et al (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Exposure to political news also directly affects electoral participation in a positive way, as documented by, e.g., Blumler (1983a), and McLeod et al. (1999).

Political interest. Political interest may affect participation both directly (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995) and indirectly, via political discussion – politically interested people tend to discuss politics more often (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999) – and via party identification (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). In spite of the intimate relationship between the two variables I make a distinction between political discussion and political interest in order to use the discussion variable as an instrument to assess the two-step flow hypothesis. I conceptualize discussion as more specific than interest, partly driven by interest, but partly also by other factors (not included in the model) such as density of social networks and frequency of social contacts. Therefore, I hypothesize that interest affects discussion, and not the other way around.

Political efficacy. I expect that this variable has a direct impact on participation, without requiring mediation by way of party identification and political discussion. Several studies found that the extent to which people feel efficacious about the political process positively affects the likelihood to vote (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Blais, 2000; Converse, 1972; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Morrell, 2003; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991; Powell, 1986).

One might argue that exposure to political news and political interest should be positioned as mediating variables in the model rather than as exogenous variables. Both variables might plausibly be regarded as influenced by party identification and by political discussion, which would imply that these relationships are reciprocal by nature. For political efficacy too, the direction of the effect may run in the opposite direction, i.e., participation increases efficacy (Finkel, 1985). Nevertheless, I expect that party identification and political discussion react more rapidly on changes in exposure and interest, than the latter react to changes in the former. I also expect electoral participation to react more rapidly to changes in efficacy than the other way around. This seems reasonable especially because MPP effects that are mediated by party identification and political discussion mainly take place during election campaigns (i.e., short-term effects)⁴⁶. As far as the relationship between efficacy and participation is concerned, the positive effect of participation on efficacy is one that requires a rather long period to materialize (Finkel, 1985). Moreover, the effect as it is depicted in Model 1 is supported by a more extensive literature than the reverse effect. For these reasons, I consider exposure to political news, political interest and political efficacy as exogenous variables, rather than as endogenous and mediating variables.

Method

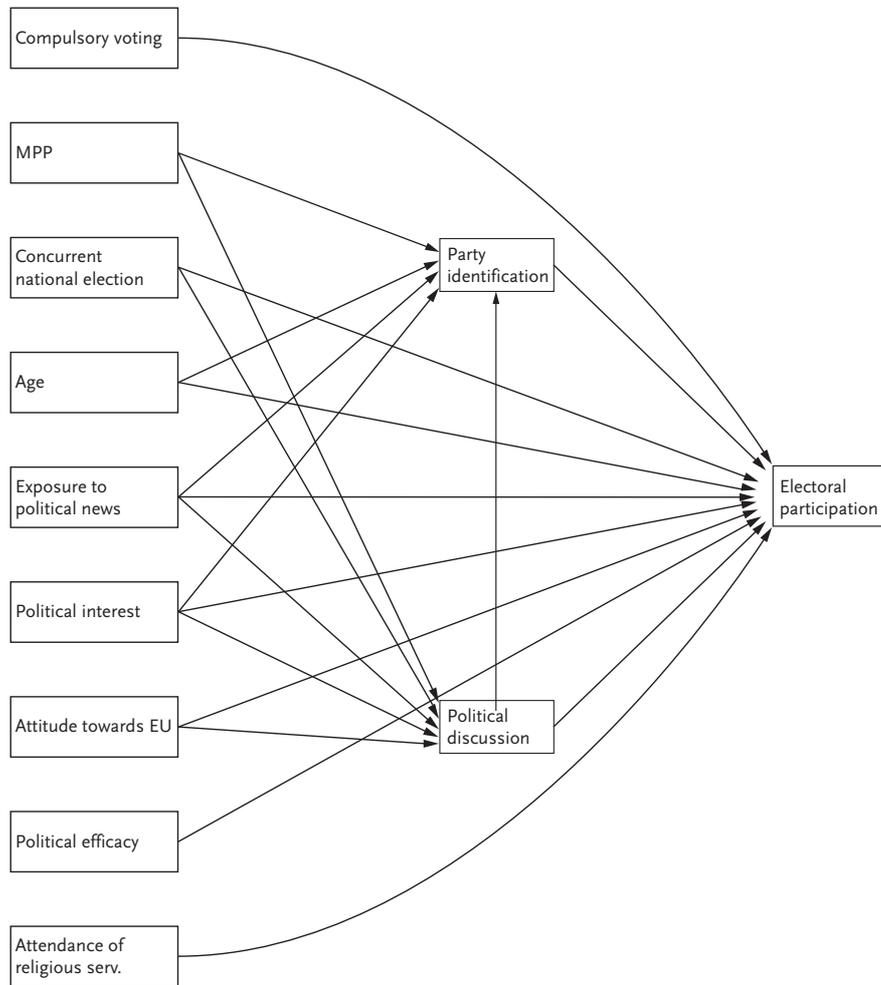
The hypothesized network of causal relationships discussed above, and presented in Figure 1 will be the basis for empirical analyses that are particularly meant to elucidate the ways in which the contextual variable MPP affects individual level electoral participation. In the previous section I presented hypothesized causal mechanisms that have observable implications, and that can thus be tested empirically. The added value of these tests – which are implemented in structural equation methods – over and above the regression analyses presented in Chapters 1 and 2 is the ability to model mediating variables. The analyses in this chapter are thus conducted by means of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The SEM methodology allows one to distinguish the direct and indirect components of causal effects, and thus to assess the extent to which a causal effect (often referred to as ‘total’ effect) is mediated by one or several variables. Chapter 1 demonstrated the existence of an MPP effect on participation; in this chapter, I will study via which causal pathways this effect materializes. This is important in order to

⁴⁶ In order to draw stronger conclusions about the direction and possible reciprocity of causal relationships, experimental (Iyengar, 2002) or panel study data (Bartels, 2006) would be required, rather than the cross sectional data that are analysed here.

fully understand the causal mechanism (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994) that underlies the effect. Estimation of the structural equation model produces estimates of the specified effects, measures of fit of the entire model and so-called modification indices that indicate how the model could be improved in case of poor fit. If the hypotheses in this chapter are supported by the data, I should find significant effects of MPP on political discussion and party identification in combination with significant effects of these two latter variables on electoral participation. Most of the other exogenous variables serve as controls, which implies that the expectations about their effects (see Figure 1) are of less central importance as the effects of the three variables mentioned above in order to test the hypotheses.

I test the hypothesized model with the Amos implementation of structural equation modeling (Arbuckle, 2003), using the same data from the European Election Study 1999 as were used in the analyses of Chapter 1. The data are described in some detail in Appendix A (survey information) and in Appendix C (construction MPP variable). The data from the various country samples are pooled, which is, obviously, required to obtain variation in the MPP variable, and which necessitates the inclusion of the two other contextual variables (concurrent national elections and compulsory voting). For the purposes of this chapter – testing the hypotheses about the mediating effects of party identification and political discussion – several conditions must be met. First, the overall fit of the model should be satisfactory. This can be expressed in a variety of ways, of which I will use χ^2 , CFI and RMSEA. In the section on results I will explicate how these measures are to be interpreted. Second, the effects of MPP on party identification and on political discussion should be positive and significant; while the effects of these mediating variables should also be positive and significant.

Figure 1 Hypothesized model explaining electoral participation⁴⁷



⁴⁷ Covariances between exogenous variables were also estimated. However, for the sake of clarity, they were not displayed in Figure 1.

Results

SEM-analyses are not conducted on individual-level data directly, but on correlations (or alternatively, covariances) between the variables included in the model as specified. The correlations are reported in Table 1⁴⁸. For the purposes of this chapter, the correlations between MPP and the two (mediating) variables are of particular importance. Table 1 shows that MPP is positively and significantly related to participation, as expected ($r=.18$). The table also indicates that the relationship between MPP and party identification ($r=.09$) and between MPP and political discussion ($r=.07$) are positive and significant, as I expected.

Table 1 Correlations based on weighted data (n=10,299)

	Electoral participation	Exposure to political news	Political discussion	Political interest	Party identification	Political efficacy	Attitude towards EU	Age	Att. religious service	MPP	Compulsory voting	Concurrent national election
Electoral participation	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Exposure to political news	0.15	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Political discussion	0.23	0.29	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Political interest	0.21	0.52	0.34	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Party identification	0.21	0.22	0.19	0.28	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Political efficacy	-0.16	-0.19	-0.16	-0.21	-0.11	1.00	.	.	.	.	.	.
Attitude towards EU	0.12	0.15	0.00	0.10	0.09	-0.10	1.00	.	.	.	.	.
Age	-0.14	-0.19	-0.01	-0.13	-0.16	-0.03	0.04	1.00	.	.	.	.
Att. religious service	0.13	0.10	0.08	0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.06	-0.15	1.00	.	.	.
MPP	0.18	-0.08	0.07	-0.06	0.09	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	0.10	1.00	.	.
Compulsory voting	0.29	-0.09	0.05	0.01	0.07	-0.03	0.04	0.01	-0.09	-0.14	1.00	.
Concurrent national election	0.31	-0.11	0.06	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.13	0.06	0.08	-0.04	0.62	1.00

⁴⁸ In all analyses in this chapter, data are weighted so that the distributions of turnout and party choice are identical to the actual results of the June 1999 European election in the respective countries. Subsequently, all country samples are weighted to an equal size so that the effective number of cases is equal for each of the systems. For details about the weighting variable involved see Appendix H.

The fit of an estimated model can be expressed in numerous ways. I use three measures: χ^2 , the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation index (RMSEA). As all these measures indicate the fit in a slightly different way, it is preferable not to consider the indices in isolation, but always in conjunction. Ideally, an estimated model would result in a low χ^2 (not-significant), a CFI value of .95 or more, and a RMSEA value of .05 or less, with p for the test of close fit ($p_{\text{close}} > .05$) (Browne & Cudeck, 1992). The drawback of the χ^2 -statistic is that it is dependent on the number of observations, making it almost impossible to attain a low (not significant) value for very large samples (Widaman & Thompson, 2003). The RMSEA measure – which is, as χ^2 , a badness-of-fit measure – is therefore preferable in large datasets. In combination with CFI, it offers a more appropriate perspective on model fit.

The model reported in Figure 1 was estimated. The fit was not acceptable – irrespective of which of the three criteria was used – and the modification indices suggested three additional effects that would improve the fit significantly. These additional effects – although not hypothesized – are not incompatible with any theoretical insights, and can therefore be included in a modified model. The resulting modified model was subsequently estimated. It is displayed in Figure 2 with the added effects highlighted. Although the χ^2 was not fully satisfactory – $\chi^2 = 189.43$ ($df=7$, $n = 10,299$), $p = .000$ – the other two measures indicate a quite satisfactory fit between the estimated model and the data: CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05 with $p_{\text{close}} = .453$. A naïve use of χ^2 would easily lead to the rejection of the model, in spite of its very acceptable fit in terms of the other measures. I think that the large number of cases – over 10,000 – argues against such a use of the χ^2 statistic, and that the conclusion is justified that the model displayed in Figure 2 is well-fitting.

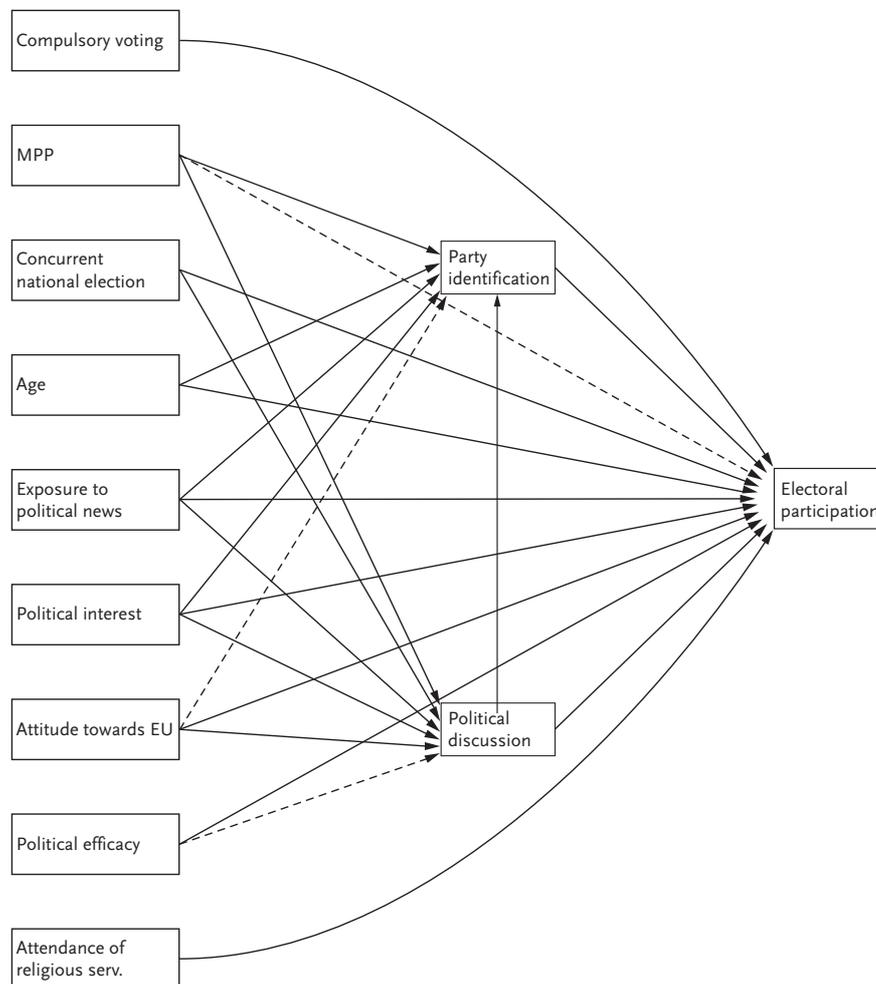
Table 2 shows the standardized effects of the estimated (modified) model. In view of the questions addressed in this chapter, the effects that describe the (indirect) effects of MPP on electoral participation are of particular relevance. Each of these indirect effects consists of a path of chained direct effects. The indirect effect of MPP via party identification is defined by the effects of MPP on party identification ($\beta = .020$), and by the subsequent effect of party identification on participation ($\beta = .042$). The strength of this indirect effect can be obtained by multiplying the effects of the separate direct effects contained in this path: $\beta = .020 * .042 = .001$. Similarly, the indirect effect of MPP on electoral participation – via political discussion – is: $\beta = .015 * .074 = .001$. This indicates that nearly 10% of the total effect of MPP on electoral participation is mediated by political discussion and party identification. The coefficients may be significant, and the results provide support for their mediating role; they are not very substantial. They provide only a small part of the causal mechanism via which MPP affects electoral participation. More than 90% of the total MPP effect remains unmediated. As I argued earlier, the nature of the media partisanship makes it almost impossible to understand any direct effect on participation as a self-evident causal mechanism. This means that the effect must somehow be mediated by other variables not included in the model. For the present, the black box of this effect has just been opened slightly, and further research is required to understand its operation more fully.

Table 2 Standardized effect coefficients

Effect	Estimate (direct)	Estimate (indirect)	Estimate (total)
Political interest → Political discussion	.211		.211
Exposure to political news → Political discussion	.044		.044
Political efficacy → Political discussion	-.061		-.061
Attitude towards EU → Political discussion	-.064		-.064
Concurrent national election → Political discussion	.131		.131
MPP → Political discussion	.015		.015
Concurrent national election → Party identification		.017	.017
Age → Party identification	-.008		-.008
Political interest → Party identification	.240	.027	.267
Political discussion → Party identification	.129		.129
Exposure to political news → Party identification	.021	.006	.027
Attitude towards EU → Party identification	.086	-.008	.078
MPP → Party identification	.020	.002	.022
Political efficacy → Party identification		-.008	-.008
Concurrent national election → Electoral participation	.174	.010	.184
Compulsory voting → Electoral participation	.251		.251
Attitude towards EU → Electoral participation	.039	-.007	.032
Political discussion → Electoral participation	.074	.005	.079
Expos. to political news → Electoral participation	.008	.004	.012
Political interest → Electoral participation	.061	.027	.088
Party identification → Electoral participation	.042		.042
Political efficacy → Electoral participation	-.046	-.005	-.051
Age → Electoral participation	-.003	-.000	-.003
Att. religious service → Electoral participation	.030		.030
MPP → Electoral participation	.020	.002	.022
Total R ² participation	.16		

The model portrayed in Figure 2 includes three relationships that were originally not hypothesized: a positive *direct* effect of MPP on participation ($\beta = .02$; already discussed above), an effect of efficacy on political discussion ($\beta = -.06$)⁴⁹, and an effect of attitude towards European unification on party identification ($\beta = .09$).

Figure 2 Estimated model explaining electoral participation⁵⁰- dotted arrows indicate effects originally not hypothesized but added to improve model-fit



⁴⁹ This variable was coded negatively; a negative sign indicates a positive effect.

⁵⁰ Covariances between exogenous variables were also estimated. However, for the sake of clarity, they were not drawn in this model.

The model explains 16% of the variation in participation⁵¹. Table 2 shows that MPP is not one of the strongest predictors of participation, and I would not expect it to be as MPP is a contextual characteristic and thus unable to account for the huge within-context variation in my data. Nevertheless, an increase of 1 point in MPP results in an increase in voter participation of 2.2% (total effect), *ceteris paribus*. This is a far from negligible difference, especially when considering the low participation levels at elections to the European Parliament.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explicate the causal mechanism that manifests itself in the effect of MPP on voting, the existence of which was demonstrated in Chapter 1 and 2. I hypothesized that MPP affects participation indirectly, mediated by party identification and political discussion. The results showed that the effect of MPP on electoral participation is indeed partially mediated via these two variables, but, at the same time, that these indirect effects absorb the total effect of MPP only to a limited degree. While the hypotheses were thus empirically supported, they provide only a small part of the answer to the question that motivated this chapter.

Although not of direct relevance to the central question of this chapter, a slightly unexpected, but in the context of political communication noteworthy result from the analyses is that political discussion is a strong predictor of participation, stronger than exposure to political information. To some extent, this reflects the indirect effect of political interest, MPP and four other exogenous variables (see Figure 2) on political participation, but it also reflects an autonomous impact of discussion. This is particularly relevant as political scientists more often than not omit this variable in individual-level analyses of electoral participation, conceivably because its effect is assumed to be absorbed by the more general concept of political interest (see, e.g., Franklin, 2004; Niedermayer, 1990; Powell, 1986, none of whom considers the effect of political talk in the explanation of electoral participation and turnout).

Why would political discussion have a stronger effect on participation than mass media exposure, which is more commonly included in analyses of electoral participation? One answer can be found in a focus-group study of Dutch non-voters and their reasons and motives for abstaining (Dekker, 2002). At the conclusion of the focus-group discussion, one of the participants said 'Maybe I will go and vote anyway. It is rather interesting once you're talking about it'. Another respondent said: 'Just now I've heard a lot of opinions that I need to think about. Clearer than on TV. So one starts to think about it'. These remarks illustrate that political discussion of political issues may be a more important catalyst for reflection and turning out, than more passive exposure to media contents

⁵¹ This percentage is much smaller than the percentage found in Chapter 1 (27%). This may partly be due to the fact that the models tested in Chapter 1 and 4 are not identically specified. A more important explanation of the differences found is that the SEM-analyses reported in this chapter result in a R^2 measure, whereas the logit models applied in Chapter 1 supply McFadden pseudo- R^2 's.

such as watching news on television. This conclusion is in accordance with McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy (1999), who found that political discussion has a strong impact on electoral participation, an effect that is larger than the impact of television news viewing on participation. It also supports earlier findings by Gamson (1992), who found that people need to discuss politics with other people in order to make sense of political news to which they are exposed via mass media.

If we assume that the contextual variable media partisanship (MPP) can only affect electoral participation via other – individual-level – variables, the fact that the direct parameter remains significant after including the mediating variables indicates that other mediating variables must exist at the individual level than those included in this chapter. Although the available data did not allow them to be tested, three such mediators may be of particular interest: societal norms with respect to participation, the perceived saliency of the election, and trust in political institutions.

Most democratic societies value political participation, particularly electoral participation. Low levels of turnout are commonly regarded as indirect signs of some kind of shortfall in the quality of representative democracy. Even if participation is not an explicit norm in itself, then strongly linked norms relating to citizen duty are. Such norms may be strengthened by high levels of MPP, because in that case attachments to groups (based on party-political grounds) get reinforced via partisan news from the media. It increases norms of support for the group which may be expressed in turning out and vote. Another explanation is that frequent exposure to the election campaign increases the sense of civic duty, which, in turn, promotes turnout. The reason for this expectation is that partisan newspapers provide strong party endorsements, which imply a summons to turn out and vote. Highly partisan media contexts (systems with strong MPP) may especially promote such a sense of civic duty.

Elections to the European Parliament are generally perceived as relatively unimportant. In other words, they are low-saliency events (Blumler, 1983b; Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000; Van der Brug & Van der Eijk, 2007; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Saliency is one of the key factors explaining differences in turnout in elections to the European Parliament (Franklin, 1996), a factor that is strongly determined by the agenda-setting function of the media – mainly newspapers and television news (McCombs, 2004). Although the data that I used offer no possibilities to test this directly, I expect that the perceived saliency of the election is greater in high MPP contexts, because it is particularly in such contexts that (partisan) media will attempt to mobilize their readers.

The third variable that may help translate the partisan nature of media context in mobilizing processes is trust in political institutions. Baldassare (1985) argues that exposure to homogeneous views from interpersonal networks increases individuals' trust in local government. This may especially be the case among lower educated people, as their levels of trust seem to be much more predicted by news media use than among more educated people (Chan, 1997). It seems plausible that this phenomenon is not limited to local politics, but that it will also exist at the national (or supranational) level, where exposure to mass media information fulfils the same function as interpersonal networks of information do at the local level. In highly partisan media contexts, media diversity

will be external (i.e., different party-political stances between media outlets) rather than internal (different party-political positions within media outlets). As a consequence, in such contexts individual citizens will be exposed to relatively homogenous media contents when compared to citizens in low MPP contexts. This could promote higher levels of trust in political institutions, and, in turn electoral participation. This argument resembles Patterson's (2002) who argues that ever since partisan journalism had died out in the US, political trust and electoral participation both started to decline. Moreover, he draws attention to the rise of 'negative' news – which has a demobilizing effect – as a consequence of declining media partisanship. This raises the question whether MPP is related to the extent of negativism in the news. I will return to this question in the final, concluding chapter.

None of these three possible mediating variables were measured in the dataset used in my analyses. Therefore, future research on MPP effects should also examine these three variables and their role in the causal mechanism that generates the positive impact of media partisanship on electoral participation.

