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Context in political communication : measurement and effects on political behavior

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Conclusion



'Poor measurement, primitive theory', that is how Blumler & Gurevitch (1975) described the state of the art in comparative research in political communication, thirty years ago. According to Voltmer (2000: 2), not much seems to have changed 25 years later: "While the interest in comparative research has increased considerably among students of mass communication, there is still a lack of a common core of theoretical concepts and empirical indicators specifying the central structural dimensions of the mass media". This dissertation aimed to define and operationalize variables characterizing media contexts that can be expected to be of relevance for explaining electoral behavior (turnout). It does so from a political-communication perspective. In this concluding part of the book I first summarize the main arguments and conclusions of each of the chapters. Then I discuss the extent to which the dissertation succeeded in defining and operationalizing contextual variables, which will be followed by a few more general comments and conclusions. Finally, I will elaborate some of the consequences of this study for further comparative communication research.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduces Seymour-Ure's (1974) theoretical construct of press-party parallelism. It is broadened to media-party parallelism (MPP) – combining parallelism of the printed press with that of television news – and I argue that MPP may be expected to have a positive impact on electoral participation. MPP is operationalized by the strength of the linkage between voters' party preferences on the one hand and their choice of newspapers and television news channels on the other. Using data from the 1999 European Election Study I found that MPP affects all citizens, irrespective of the amount of their media use, a phenomenon interpreted in terms of two-step flow processes (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This finding strengthens the notion that MPP is a contextual characteristic, not an individual one. Moreover, the effect is strongest for those who are least politically interested. It has repeatedly been suggested in the literature that such interactions may exist with regard to media effects, on account of politically uniformed and/or uninterested citizens being most susceptible to (new) information (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). The results documented in this chapter are in accordance with this notion.

Chapter 2 focuses on Sweden. The analyses assess press-party parallelism only (as television news party parallelism is virtually absent in this country), but it does so comparatively over time (1979-2002). Data from Swedish election studies and media studies are used to demonstrate that press party parallelism has declined considerably over the last twenty years. The consequences thereof for electoral participation are shown to be considerable as well. This effect is shown to be strongest for respondents with lowest levels of political interest. These longitudinal findings validate the causal interpretation of the cross-sectional results from Chapter 1. The chapter also assesses the interpretation of the contextual nature of the MPP effect – that it reflects two-step communication flows – which finds significant support. Finally, the chapter investigates the relationship between press party parallelism and cleavage voting which are strongly correlated in

the Swedish context, thus raising the danger that the consequences attributed to press-parallelism in fact reflect cleavage voting. These specific analyses use cross-national cross-sectional data in addition to longitudinal Swedish data and yield the conclusion that parallelism and cleavage voting are really different phenomena and that the effects of the former do not reflect the latter.

Chapter 3 focuses on contexts of consonance and dissonance, by which terms the match or mismatch is indicated between a person's party preferences and the partisan character of the political information (s)he is exposed to. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet (1944) reasoned that consonance elevates electoral participation, whereas dissonance generates cross-pressures that diminish participation. Political information may thus have different impacts on behavior, depending on its match to existing preferences: party-political predispositions are thought to moderate information exposure effects. This hypothesis is generalized to other preferences that may moderate behavior, namely references for the extent of European integration. The hypothesis of a preference-moderated effect of information on electoral participation is subsequently tested empirically, using data about voting or abstaining in European Parliament elections. Differences in the expected direction are found in participation between consonance and dissonance groups, but the effects do not reach significance. Nevertheless, as was shown in Chapter 3, the effects remain quite substantial (but not significant) after inclusion of the control variables. Considering this fact along with the small sample size, I think this finding should not be neglected and deserves further investigation in future studies.

Chapter 4 again studies the phenomenon of media partisanship. It investigates *how* – via which causal mechanisms – the partisan nature of the media context (as measured by media-party parallelism) affects electoral behavior. The effect is likely to be mediated, as argued in Chapters 1 and 2. The literature suggests that party identification and political discussion as the most likely mediating variables. The former variable can be found in the literature as a mediator of mobilizing effects of exposure to partisan news (e.g., Brynin & Newton, 2003; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Newton & Brynin, 2001); the latter mediator should be present if two-step flow communication processes really take place. In this chapter European Election Study data 1999 are used to test a Structural Equation Model including these two mediation terms. It turns out that the MPP effect on participation is indeed partly mediated by these two variables. The fact that a significant direct effect remains of MPP on electoral participation indicates that there may be more mediators that are not considered in this model (mainly because the absence of relevant data). Chapter 4 finishes with three mediators that should be considered in future research, in addition to political discussion and party identification: sense of civic duty, perceived saliency of the election, and trust in political institutions.

Reflection, discussion and implications

COMPARING HELPS UNDERSTANDING

It is clear from the analyses that the specific contextual features of political communication studied in this dissertation vary between cultures. Moreover, media contexts structure the behaviour of individuals. Adding information about the media context to our models helps us explaining – and thus understanding – specific phenomena, such as electoral behavior. Differences in voting behavior across contexts can partly be explained by the specific media and communication context people are exposed to. This context is an addition to the explanation of electoral behavior, beyond more commonly used political contextual variables such as the extent of cleavage voting. The Swedish case in Chapter 2 is illustrative in this point, as the interpretation of fluctuating (on the short term) and declining (on the long term) electoral participation was on first glance due to one and the same phenomenon – whether it was labeled a decline in cleavage voting or a decline in press-party parallelism. However, studying these two phenomena in conjunction for 16 EU systems, it became clear that media-party parallelism was related, but *different* from cleavage voting. A relationship between the two phenomena was clearly present, but it was not a one-to-one association as one would be inclined to conclude from the Swedish data solely. On the one hand, this example illustrates that media-contextual variables can enrich the explanation of electoral participation, next to existing (party-) political contextual variables. On the other hand, it also illuminates one of the advantages of comparing: the fact that specific patterns of covariation between phenomena found in a specific country (such as the relationship between MPP and cleavage voting in Sweden) may found to be different in other countries.

OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

In Chapter 1 and 2, we found that turnout is relatively high in countries with strong media-party parallelism. This may be caused by long-term media endorsements of political parties or political ideologies that repeatedly (and sometimes implicitly) appear in newspapers (and, in some cases, on television news). In these countries, short-term coverage (such as events or scandals) may have a smaller effect on electoral participation, because people tend to be less susceptible to new information – particularly when existing party preferences are rather stable. Consequently, traditional studies of media effects (focusing on short-term coverage as independent and preferences or behavior as dependent variables) will not find many significant results in such countries. Zaller (1996), points out that (and why) it is “maddeningly difficult to demonstrate that the mass media actually produce powerful effects on opinion” (p.17; see also Zaller, 2002). To this observation I can add that it may be more valuable to conduct such short-term coverage studies in countries where MPP is low. According to Zaller: “When media inputs to mass opinion vary sharply, mass opinion is highly responsive” (1996, p.19). The kind of variation that Zaller refers to is *within* media, not *between* media. The findings of this current study in combination with the findings by Zaller (1996) therefore suggest that:

- 1 Short-term political communication effects on electoral behavior are stronger in countries with low MPP than in countries with high MPP;
- 2 Long-term political communication effects on persuasion are stronger in countries with high MPP than in countries with low MPP.

Bartels (1993) discusses why the findings of many studies in communication science seem to support the paradigm of minimal effects. “Political scientists studying the impact of listening to or reading reported news have been unable to document significant effects upon the attitudes, cognitions, or behavior of citizens” (Arterton, 1978 in Bartels, 1993, p.267). Bartels argues that ‘negative findings’ and ‘nonfindings’ are partly due to limitations of research design and partly to measurement error. Zaller (2002) attributes this preponderance of non-significant effects to endemic shortfalls in statistical power in the field of communication effects research. However, another pitfall of current media effects research might be the focus on individual-level media effects on individual-level (political) behavior. The current study shows that such a focus neglects the very important effects of media *context* in explaining and predicting dependent variables such as, in our/my case, electoral participation. For it is not only exposure to single news items that moves behavior. In the flow of information that people receive every day, exposure to one or a couple of news items in an experimental setting will not make much of a difference. What might make a difference, however, is the constant flow of (partisan) news that people receive. Living in an environment of partisan media stimulates people to participate in democracy, even if they do not expose themselves to any partisan news, because of the effect of constant exposure on the perceived importance of participating. Therefore, in addition to controlling for measurement error and looking more carefully at research design, we should take the media context into account and particularly its effects on the magnitude of short-term inter-individual and intra-individual communication effects.

In Chapter 4, I referred to Patterson (2002), who argued that political trust and electoral participation decline as a consequence of the contemporary absence of partisan journalism⁵². He also argues that this decline in partisan news is related to a rise of ‘negative’ news. These observations by Patterson prompt the question whether levels of MPP covary with the prevalence of negative news. Not many studies exist studying the political media coverage of all EU-15 countries studied here. One of the exceptions is a cross-national comparative content analysis of television election coverage (EP election, June 1999) in the same EU countries under study here (Peter, 2003). Peter’s study takes both the representation on television news of EU-representatives and of non-EU-representatives into account. It turned out that television coverage in Spain, United Kingdom, and Ireland

52 His argument applies to American newspapers and network news, not to cable news such as Fox News – which is often accused for being right-wing and conservative, and reporting with a pro-Republican bias (see, e.g., Kitty, 2005). Especially since the share of cable news viewing has grown substantially the last decade (and this growth mainly being due to Fox News viewing, source: Journalism.org, 2007), it is important for future studies on American news media bias to take cable news into account.

(in that order) was most positive towards politicians, whereas television news in Italy, Sweden, Austria, France, Greece, Finland and Denmark was most negative. This is only a partial representation of what is usually understood as ‘negative news’. Nevertheless, Peter’s study does not support the presumption that low MPP coincides with high negativity in media coverage, as the lowest MPP values were found in Finland, Ireland, and Germany, and the highest in Greece and Italy. Nevertheless, the relationship between media partisanship and negativity of news deserves further investigation, and particularly in longitudinal perspective.

The last aspect that I want to discuss here, is that media partisanship seems to be in decline in many developed democracies. There are several indicators for this development, one of which is the trend in Sweden, shown in Chapter 2. Another indication is the ongoing ‘professionalization of journalism’ which implies a broad array of developments in journalism, amongst which the application of more objective reporting standards, which reduces the partisan content in especially newspapers (Hadenius & Weibull, 1999; Gunther & Mughan, 2000). Newspapers tend to hide their ideological identities in order to reach an audience that is as broad and large as possible (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

A consequence of this trend may be that participation rates will decline, as is indicated by Chapter 1, 2 and 4. Nonetheless, partisan media outlets may return, as exemplified since 1996 by Fox News in the US. Apart from the possibility of new partisan news outlets emerging, partisanship may get expressed along other lines than support for political parties. One may think of political leaders, for example. With the trend towards personalization of politics (see, e.g., McAllister, forthcoming), not media-party parallelism but media-politician parallelism may structure voting behavior in the future. This possibility will be discussed more extensively in the next section.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

One of the intentions of this dissertation was to show that it is important to ‘go comparative’. Not so much for the sake of comparison *per se* (i.e. asking oneself ‘what is the level of media partisanship in various European countries?’), but rather because comparative variables explain structures beyond individual variables. The comparative method also promotes the parsimony of explanatory models: it explores similarities of outwardly diverse phenomena in different countries (see Introduction). The fact that one can sometimes derive contextual variables from individual-level survey data, as we did in the construction of the MPP-variable, is encouraging, especially because (representative) individual-level survey data are relatively abundant and thus allow explorations in contextual analysis with small investments in terms of time and money (for a more extensive discussion of the relationship between individual-level and contextual variables, see Lazarsfeld & Menzel, 1969). The fact that media contexts seem to vary to a significant extent – even within ‘relatively similar’ systems such as the member-states of the EU – is promising for the explanation of sundry social or political phenomena that are likely to be affected by media and media contexts.

Although originating from a different starting point, Brynin & Newton's (2003) research has clear connections to this one. While focusing on individual-level data, they found that exposure to partisan media contents affects participation positively. This study showed that partisanship of the media as an aggregate level (i.e., contextual) variable also affects participation in a positive way. Although it might seem straightforward that an effect at the individual level also manifests itself at the aggregate level, this is not always necessary the case, as aggregate units are more than a mere accumulation of relevant features of the individuals who form part of it (Franklin, 2003).

The aggregate-level effects found in the current study may take place via two-step flow phenomena. This indicates that partisan news may affect even those who are not directly exposed to any partisan news, but only indirectly by talking with family and friends, a notion that is supported by this study. It is remarkable to note that in this second stage of media influence (from political discussion to participation), the same phenomenon is likely to be repeated as in the first stage (from MPP to discussion), namely selective exposure. In the first stage, exposure to partisan information reinforces existing party-political preferences, thereby elevating participation. According to some studies, selective exposure also plays a role in the second stage. Scholars have indicated that people tend to talk about politics with relatively similar people, that is, people who hold the same or compatible party-political preferences (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Other studies show that talking to similar people stimulates people to vote (Mutz, 2002; Brynin & Newton, 2003). On the basis of the mediation effect of interpersonal discussion (see Chapter 4) indications are that this phenomenon reflects itself in the data studied here as well. An adequate test of this effect would require data on the party-political preferences of the respondent *as well as* such preferences of conversation partners. As such data are at present not available, this should be a topic on the agenda for future research.

The question remains whether the measures of MPP and PPP are also applicable in non-Western European countries, as truly comparative measures should be valid in any political system. I think that this may be possible in one form or another as long as one takes into account the main characteristics of the political system. As a case in point, political parties in the new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe seem to have evolved differently than their Western European counterparts, with extreme organizational instability as a consequence. They emerged (and in many cases: disappeared) rapidly after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, experienced frequent splits, mergers, and even switches of prominent politicians from one party to another (Stojarová, Šedo, Kopeček, & Chytilek, 2007). This would make it more difficult for stable patterns of media partisanship to evolve, even more so because not only the political system, but also the media system experienced a revolutionary transformation from before to after 1989.

Central and Eastern European parties' identities are not as established as they are in Western European parties and the number of parties is large (Stojarová, Šedo, Kopeček, & Chytilek, 2007). In such a party-political environment, it is not difficult to imagine that party leaders, rather than the parties themselves, or even rather than party ideologies, are the 'hooks' for political identification, and that leaders may be the entities towards whom

media display partisanship when reporting about national politics. This implies that we should not consider (preferences for) parties, but rather preferences for politicians when we want to extend the concept of MPP to Central and Eastern European countries, obviously leading to a different – yet comparable – concept of parallelism between the worlds of politics and the media.

Chapter 4 showed that MPP affects participation via political discussion and party identification. If we would find MPP to exist in Central and Eastern Europe, then the effect on electoral participation is probably not mediated through party identification – due to the characteristics of the party system – but through political discussion (and perhaps also other variables).

Likewise, in the US, MPP probably should also be operationalized in a different (but comparable) manner. Like in Western Europe, party ideologies are the means of referring to parties, but in case of the US, this is not the complete story. Much more than in Europe, people also relate to politicians. Studying MPP for the US, then, should involve both party preferences and preferences for politicians.

In conclusion, the future research agenda could expand the concept of MPP to other (non-Western European) political systems. Doing that, one should first study the political system, in order to identify the foci of citizens' political preferences⁵³ and their media use. In this way, the concept can be broadened to a very wide variety of political systems, irrespective of the nature of citizens' political identifications.

More generally, it seems important to expand the number of contextual concepts in comparative media studies. Not only do they explain variation between contexts by themselves, they also explain variation in other (party-political) variables. The importance of enlarging the number of ways in which communication or media systems can be characterized is not limited to scholars in political communication, but extends to those in other fields as well, who are equally in need of finding structures behind the 'proper names' of countries or other contextual entities (Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

⁵³ These foci are not exhausted by political parties and politicians. One may think about some political systems in Africa, where local patrons exchange people's votes for benefits.

