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Who is driving whom

The media, voters and the bandwagon

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Introduction

Introduction

Opinion polls of vote intentions play a prominent role in today's political campaigns. They are heavily reported on in the media, they are used by politicians to inform their strategy, and many believe they have a profound influence on voters as well (Donsbach & Traugott, 2008). Especially, their assumed effects on voters are often criticized. In fact, the effects of polls are feared by citizens and politicians to such a degree that their publication is (partially) banned in a variety of countries. Petersen (2012) reports that 46% of all countries have some version of a ban on polls. Such bans are restrictions of the freedom of information, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, which are particularly noteworthy as they are reserved for polls, but not other campaign events. These bans are justified on the basis of the perceived effect of polls on election outcomes, which is supposedly normatively harmful for the democratic process (Petersen, 2012). Polls are believed to be very appealing to voters and overshadow other campaign information. In addition, they, allegedly, induce emotions that distract a voter from rationally forming a vote choice.

Most studies into the effects of polls have investigated effects on vote choice and turnout levels (Hardmeier, 2008). However, such research has so far paid little attention to the role of the media, emotions or campaign interest. This dissertation will pick up these issues and investigate how polls help shape the coverage of parties in the media, how exposure to media poll coverage can influence turnout through campaign interest, and vote choice through the emotions they elicit. Studies in political science usually assume that people will find out about polls in some way and rather study how people respond to poll information. The mass media are an important information source for voters to get such poll information, yet few studies have investigated the influence of the media on the effect of polls. Media themselves are, in turn, becoming more and more reliant on poll information (see Holtz-Bacha & Strömbäck, 2012). Polls might influence media coverage, and the way polls are covered might influence their effects on voters.

When considered across the time span of an election campaign, the influence of polls on the outcome of the election might thus involve various reciprocal processes. Polls express vote intentions, but might also influence them. Polls might influence media coverage, but the influence of that coverage

on vote intentions will be reflected in the changes of those same polls. This dissertation presents three studies that each aim to examine a specific aspect of such reciprocal processes. The first study looks at the influence of poll ratings on how various media outlets cover parties over time within an election campaign. The second study deals with the effects of exposure to poll coverage, on interest in the campaign and turnout, and the third study investigates how exposure to poll coverage influences how people feel about parties and whether they (would change their) vote for them. These studies thus suggest three different kinds of consequences of polls over the course of a campaign. Their results can inform the construction of a model of poll effects that takes account of the potential reciprocal processes during a campaign.

As these three studies look at specific aspects of a process which is likely rather complex, it is important to contextualize them within the larger literature. Polls and their effects have been debated from their very invention (Robinson, 1937), so starting with the history of this debate will set the stage, followed by a review of the empirical literature and the possible contribution a communication science perspective can make. It will be argued that when investigating the influence of poll coverage over the time span of an electoral campaign, many actors are involved like voters, journalists, politicians and their campaign teams. Each of them might shape interpretations and influence the effects of polls. The studies in this dissertation will make a start to incorporate each of them in the study of poll effects.

The debate around polls

Opinion polls of vote intentions aim to measure the will of the people. They provide a quick and concise interpretation of the broad variety of opinions present in a large group of people. Polls make these complex collective opinions tangible by putting them into numbers. Other ways to get such information would be to ask experts or talk to people in person. However, there is only a limited number of people one can meet to discuss an issue personally, and the impression formed in that way would likely be biased due to the small sample of the opinions collected. Opinion polls simplify the diversity and complexity of all individual opinions and distill aggregate opinions instead. This has important practical implications. Policy makers can use polls to go beyond the particulars

expressed to them in personal contacts to take account of, and respond to, the will of the millions of people they are chosen to represent (see f.e., Donsbach & Traugott, 2008). When politician's voters indicate they would switch their votes in favor of another party, this politician is apparently losing the former support for her policy program.

However lofty the ideal of polls helping politicians to learn about the wishes of their electorate, opinion polls have been under attack from the moment of their first appearance in the political realm (Hardmeier, 2008). In short, opinion polls simplify, and any simplification can lead to bias and be used to deceive. Instead of expressing the population's will and give people a voice, some believe opinion polls actually have the opposite effect of numbing people's minds and transforming them in a flock of sheep blindly following the numbers presented to them. Polls are believed to be so attractive as to stop people's rational thinking process and turn them into a mindless crowd. Claude Robinson expresses this position in one of the first scientific articles to discuss the effects of polls on democracy:

"In cases where public opinion is not deeply rooted, says this paper, straw polls frequently tend to develop a bandwagon rush on the part of the electorate, thus increasing the influence of mob action and decreasing the influence of individual reason in determining the outcome." (Robinson, 1937: 47)

The metaphorical term "bandwagon" used in this quote refers to a campaign tactic used in 19th century American politics (Schmitt-Beck, 2015). A wagon carrying a music band was used to attract a crowd to a politician's campaign, when his caravan went through a town. People gathered to march behind the bandwagon to enjoy the music. Since then the "bandwagon effect" is used as a term to describe people adjusting their opinion to conform to a group opinion. In this dissertation it refers to voters, journalists or other actors adjusting their behavior and attitudes in line with changes in party preferences as shown in published opinion polls.

The idea behind a human herd instinct in opinion formation has a sound scientific basis. In one of the classic experiments in psychology, Solomon Asch (1951) showed participants three lines that clearly differ in length and asked them to indicate which of the three lines equals the length of a fourth line, shown directly next to the original three. As this task is fairly simple,

participants tended to perform well in successive rounds of the test. However, a different set of participants, the experimental group, were put in a room with a number of other people who appear to be other participants, but in reality collaborate with the experimenter. These other people gave unanimous, but incorrect answers to a predetermined number of rounds of the test. Asch finds that about a third of the participants adjust half or more of their own answers in order to conform to this incorrect group opinion.

It seems reasonable to assume that the same mechanism is at work while people are reaching their vote choice. Elections are also situations in which a large group of people express their opinions simultaneously, and in making their decision people can learn about the opinions of others through published polls. Much research has explored the question of whether polls influence vote choice, but for decades scientists were unable to agree on the existence of a bandwagon effect in voting. Early studies find that, when asked, almost no voter gives opinion poll results as the reason for their vote choice (Niemi, Iusi, & Bianco, 1983). Some experiments even found support for an underdog effect rather than a bandwagon effect (e.g. Ceci & Kain, 1982). The underdog effect is the opposite of the bandwagon effect and describes the case when voters move away from the likely winner of the election and vote for the competitor instead. To try and move the debate further, scholars have started using more advanced research designs and a consensus is now emerging in favor of a (small) bandwagon effect in vote choice (Schmitt-Beck, 2015).

Whether the existence of such an effect is good or bad from a normative point of view depends on what causes the effect as well as one's preferred ideal type of democracy. At one extreme of the spectrum of ideas about democracy, Schumpeter (1976: 269) defines "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." In Schumpeter's view the people are distinct from the elites who compete for their vote. The most important function of elections is the rotation of these elites. Elites can make superior decisions to advance the common interest through their knowledge and expertise. Which particular elites are chosen is less important. Consequently, it is less important which motivation drives the vote choices of the people. As ordinary citizens are not seen as capable of making elite decisions on the best government policy anyway, they might just as well be driven by a bandwagon rush. Advocates of this view of democracy

point to the large body of work showing the low levels of political knowledge among citizens, how predictably irrational people make decisions, and how easily they may be misled (Clawson & Oxley, 2008; Fossen & Anderson, 2014).

Many disagree with this rather shallow view of democracy and require more citizen involvement. Theorists advocating participatory democratic models generally believe people can and should actively participate in political decision making (Clawson & Oxley, 2008). Many citizens just lack the resources to make government policy decisions, because democratic states give them little opportunity to develop those through participation. Democracies should encourage participation and get people in a positive cycle of increased involvement. Participation can be self-rewarding as it helps self-development and self-esteem. The value of a possible bandwagon effect from this perspective depends on whether it helps people to participate more in politics and whether it helps them make better, or more informed, voting decisions.

Review of the literature

The moral critique on the influence of polls hinges on various assumptions about the mechanism behind a possible bandwagon effect: polls would reduce rational argumentation in vote choice formation, they would spark emotions, and suppress independent reasoning in favor of group conformation. Much remains unknown about the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect, but several empirical studies have investigated aspects relevant to whether polls help or hurt democracy. These studies will shortly be reviewed and it will be argued that the role of the media is important, but as of yet understudied.

The mechanism behind the bandwagon effect. The most elaborate work on the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect is Mutz' (1998) book "Impersonal Influence". She finds that poll exposure enhances political thinking. Participants list more pro- and counter arguments when they consider their candidate preference after they have been exposed to poll results. In another experiment, when participants had no information that discredited or supported a candidate, she found that participants relied on poll results as an indication for a candidate's quality (Mutz, 1998). These participants recognized they lacked sufficient information, but reasoned that the poll expressed the information others had. They used the poll result as a heuristic cue to help

arrive at a more informed vote choice. Bartels (1988) investigated the use of polls by US primary voters. In each primary multiple candidates compete. He finds that voters use polls to choose among otherwise equally preferred candidates to avoid wasting one's vote and in the hope to increase the chance to defeat another, disliked, but popular candidate. In each of these examples, polls were used to inform decision making and bandwagon effects appear to be beneficial in light of participatory democratic ideals.

Still, these three are only a few of the studies into the effects of polls and the full picture might be more complex. Kenney and Rice (1994) explore the psychology behind the bandwagon and add two additional potential mechanisms. Contagion refers to the herd instinct and the crowd psychology of following the leader because of the "emotional excitement, the enthusiasm of the crowds" (Hardmeier, 2008: 509). Gratification is similar, but refers to seeking emotional benefits of being on the winning side and avoid disappointment by abandoning a losing candidate or party (Hardmeier, 2008). Both these mechanisms highlight the potential contributions emotions might make to explaining bandwagon effects. Emotions have often been cited when discussing bandwagon effects, but rarely measured.

In addition, most studies investigate the immediate effects of poll exposure, but their cumulative, and over time, effect across an election campaign might be different (Mutz, 1998). Polls can have effects on other actors besides voters and might have a separate influence on voters via these other actors. Henshel and Johnston (1987) argue that polls can influence fundraising capabilities, volunteer recruitment and endorsements, and Mutz (1998) adds free media attention. Theoretical work has suggested that each can amplify or counteract the other in producing effects (Henshel and Johnston, 1987; Mutz, 1998). Polls can thus influence voters indirectly through their effect on the party's/ candidate's resources.

Such direct and indirect effects of polls might escalate over the course of a campaign and might be more or less desirable from a participatory democracy point of view. Boudreau and McCubbins (2010) note how polls are least reliable when voters have acquired little substantial information on which to base their choice. They give their preferences when asked by pollsters, but these could likely change in the face of new information. This situation is typical for many voters, when interviewed many months before an election. However, if such polls trigger effects on the consequent proliferation of campaign information

by advantaging some, and disadvantaging other contenders, this influences the information environment in which these voters will consequently make their voting decision. In a participatory democracy, voters use campaigns to potentially alter their party preference and use their acquired insights to elect the optimal government. In line with Mutz' (1998) argument, polls might trigger political thinking, but what if the information that comes to mind is itself, in part, a consequence of the poll result? If polls influence party coverage, this might lead to a non-rational, poll driven process of preference formation, and result in sub-optimal vote choices (Boudreau & McCubbins, 2010).

The media. As the media form the main arena in which modern political parties compete for votes, they are an appropriate place to look for evidence of such indirect poll effects. That media exert an important influence within the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect is often assumed or taken for granted, but much less tested. Sigelman (1989: 36) notes, "Clearly, what matters most in establishing [a bandwagon effect] is not a candidate's actual performance, but rather the interpretation (the so-called "spin") that political opinion makers place on this performance."

Several studies implicitly do test media influences within the bandwagon effect. They suggest that media effects are not only important in understanding bandwagon effects, but might even determine what kind of effect polls have at all. For example, Fleitas (1971) manipulated the experimental group in his study with the description of the election as a "contest between an advantaged frontrunner and a disadvantaged underdog", and found that this group increased its vote intention for the underdog compared to the control group. The designation of the underdog as "disadvantaged" might have triggered sympathy with the participants. These findings suggest that such media "spin" might be responsible for some of the underdog effects found in the literature.

Polls can have an influence on campaign coverage in a variety of ways. They are heavily covered themselves (Bhatti & Pedersen, 2015; Brettscheider, 1997; 2008), their coverage fits a tendency towards horse race coverage of campaigns (Aalberg, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2012), but they might also be used as a framework for journalists to order other campaign news (Rosenstiel, 2005). Still, the relationship between polls and campaign coverage might not be one-on-one. Searles, Ginn and Nickens (2016) find that media are an active gatekeeper and choose which polls to report and which to neglect. Journalists can also exert an influence in the way they describe poll results. They have some

leeway in presenting a poll positively or negatively, for example by choosing the reference point with which to compare the current result (Strömbäck, 2012a). A party can be down 2% since last week, but also still be outperforming pre-campaign expectations. Voters, in turn, may be influenced by this poll coverage, which can trigger affective as well as cognitive processes. Still, the effect of poll coverage on voters is likely to depend on whether that coverage is actually observed. Voters can avoid (certain) media coverage altogether, and can be more or less interested in the coverage they do consume.

There is a large body of research into the relation between polls, media coverage, and voters, but it has focused only little on the effects of polls, like the effect of “spin” on voters. Instead, its major concern is with the kind of campaign coverage associated with polls, usually called horse race or strategic coverage (Aalberg, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2011). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) describe how, with the help of polls, campaigns are increasingly covered in terms of winners and losers, rather than by attention for issue positions. Voters confronted with this kind of coverage might get the impression that all politicians care about is winning, rather than improving the common good. Over time, this might lead to cynicism and reduced political participation. This effect is not only due to horse race news taking up space within the news that could otherwise have been used for substantive issues, but also because horse race news attracts more attention and leads people to overlook the remaining substantive issue coverage (Valentino, Buhr, & Beckman, 2001). Such an effect would be bad from the viewpoint of participatory democracy, because cynicism reduces participation and lack of attention for substantive issues makes it more difficult for voters to adequately base their voting decisions on issue positions.

It is thus important to examine the role of the media within the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect over time. The expertise of communication scientists in studying the media can add to the already broad literature on the bandwagon effect. Bandwagon research has progressed simultaneously in separate fields. Economists care especially about rational actor assumptions (e.g. Großer & Schram, 2010), and political scientists about effects of polls on election outcomes (e.g. Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, & Aaldering, 2015). Recently, political scientists have begun studying indirect effects of polls on election outcomes via campaign funding and media coverage (e.g. Box-Steffensmeier, Darmofal & Farrell, 2009; Christenson & Smidt, 2012), but they have yet to capitalize on the full range of theoretical insights into media

effects available among communication scientists (e.g. Zerback, Reinemann, & Nienierza, 2015). Applied to bandwagon effects, it might be that polls can influence campaign interest and accordingly enlarge the selection of campaign information consumed.

Towards a dynamic theory of poll influence on voting via media coverage

A variety of communication theoretical perspectives could contribute to studies of bandwagon effects. In this dissertation, the focus will specifically be on Slater's (2007; 2015) reinforcing spirals model (RSM). He proposes that the effects media have on individual attitudes and behaviors results from a reinforcing spiral of an individual being exposed to media and influenced by it, but also affecting this individual's subsequent selection of media content, exposure to which can then reinforce/enhance the effects of previous exposure and again influence subsequent selection etc. As poll effects might develop over the course of a campaign, analyzing how they influence vote choice and turnout across an election campaign can benefit from such a dynamic perspective. The studies in this dissertation are designed to apply Slater's (2015) model and extend it in three specific ways: by investigating the influence of audience attitudes on media *content* in addition to media selection, by positing "interest" as a key linking variable between media effects and media selection, and by evaluating the role of emotions within the spiral of selection and effects. Each will be shortly discussed and introduced here, but first it will be evaluated how evidence on the bandwagon effect relates to an over-time perspective, and then its fit with the RSM will be further examined.

Like the RSM, the bandwagon effect is likely to be the result of mutually influencing processes developing over time. For example, polls can influence campaign coverage over time, while exposure to campaign coverage might change the preferences which translate in corresponding changes in polls. Within this dynamic process effects might escalate or dampen (Slater, 2015). Effects do not automatically reinforce each other and extrapolating short term findings from experiments to a cumulative, over time, process might be problematic. Repeated poll exposure might or might not lead to a stronger effect on vote intention, but, in any case, media effects should not be expected

to escalate without bounds (Slater, 2015). Likewise, aggregate level studies, which have looked at effects of polls on voting, while ignoring individual differences in information processing and poll exposure, might miss separate but counteracting effects for different individuals. When, for example, positive polls increase party support for some people, but decrease it for others, the aggregate effect might be small even though the individual effect is substantial (see Mutz, 1998).

In addition, when including time explicitly the process becomes more complicated as various actors might (seek to) interfere. In any social process actors have free will, influences upon them are not deterministic, and their agency can play an important role. Humans do not merely react automatically to a stimulus, they might anticipate it and reflect before they act on it. In the process of campaign bandwagon effects, various actors might exercise their agency to shape the outcome of the election. Parties/candidates likely want to win, journalists want to sell their stories to their audience, and voters might want to make an optimal vote choice. Campaign teams can feed stories to the press, journalists can select and frame, and voters can select and process information. Each reflecting on and influencing the ongoing process of polls affecting vote intentions.

Development of such models of media effects over time is still in its infancy, but is critical to judge the normative and practical relevance of, for example, bandwagon effects. The current state-of-the-art is Slater's (2007, 2015) reinforcing spiral model (RSM). This model emphasizes how media exposure and effects feed off each other in a continuous feedback loop. Media exposure creates interest and interest, in turn, breeds exposure. It should be noted that the model does not necessarily predict an escalatory process. Slater (2015: 373) describes how identity formation plays a crucial role in media selection, but at the same time media exposure helps form and maintain that identity: "The RSM argues that when social identity is under threat (during political campaigns or other times when rival ideologies are becoming salient, or at times of economic or social strain), selective use of attitude- and identity-consistent content should increase until a satisfactory equilibrium is reached. When identity threats are diminished, such selectivity can be reduced." Applied to the effect of campaign coverage this might entail that voters are concerned with selecting media that both help them maintain their identity, and form an identity-consistent party preference.

However, much of how this process precisely unfolds over time is still unknown. Within this dissertation two extensions to the RSM will be proposed and examined: emotions and media content. A growing body of research shows how emotions guide information seeking as well as information processing, both of which are central to Slater's model (e.g. Marcus, MacKuen, & Neuman, 2011). Slater (2015: 373) does already imply the importance of emotions as he emphasizes the importance of identity *threat*, and urges more research on this topic. In addition, emotions are at the core of social identity theory, which Slater posits as a cornerstone of the RSM. Tajfel (1981: 255) describes a person's social identity as: "knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership".¹ Still, emotions are not explicitly included as a variable in the RSM. Regarding the role of emotions, Slater (2015) argues that identity threat might come about as the result of accumulating processes over time, such as reduced employment opportunity, immigration, changing moral values, international conflict or the identity shifts inherent in adolescence. By describing the role of emotions as a trigger for reinforcing media use in the RSM, Slater treats them essentially as a background variable that might set off the RSM which then continues as an independent, separate process.

However, it could be that emotions, more generally, play an additional role *within* the spiral as well. Indeed, Slater (2015: 374) does acknowledge this possibility for identity threat within his graphical depiction of the RSM. Still, many other emotions besides threat can play a role. The effects of three emotions in particular have been widely studied. According to Marcus, MacKuen, and Neuman's (2011) affective intelligence theory, anxiety can trigger information search, aversion leads to avoidance and motivated reasoning, and enthusiasm reinforces current efforts. Consequently, such different emotions can influence media selection and media effects, and are not necessarily exogenous to media exposure. Emotions can be the result of exposure to political media coverage. Marcus, MacKuen, and Neuman (2011) argue that especially those emotions that are linked most closely to our political attitudes, are most relevant in explaining how those attitudes develop. Much research shows that media exposure can induce various emotions (e.g. Lecheler, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2013). Emotions, in turn, have been linked to selection processes, as they

1 Also see Trang (2011).

may trigger information search (e.g. Marcus et al., 2011), and emotions can alter the effects of exposure through their effect on information processing. In addition, emotions are highly intertwined with cognitive processes, which might influence selection and exposure effects (Marcus et al., 2011). Emotions might thus play a much broader and more influential role within Slater's spiral. They might not only trigger a reinforcing spiral, but also help form its path. They might result from media exposure and influence which media sources are selected, how often, and how their information is processed.

Media agency is another possible active node within the RSM chain of media selection and media effects. Journalists, political parties, campaign teams, social movements and all kinds of other actors might have a preference for and interest in what is published in the media. Consequently, each of them might help shape the media content in a way that is independent from the process of selection and effects described by Slater (2015). Media might play an active role in influencing exposure and effects. Through their roles as gatekeepers, by following news values, and by observing norms such as balanced coverage, journalists might actively shape the media agenda (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schudson & Anderson, 2009; White, 1950). The resulting media coverage can influence which information is more or less likely to be encountered. Opinion polls, for example, may help journalists to build and shape stories independently from political institutions (Strömbäck, 2012b). Consequently, even if attitudes towards parties drive selective exposure, the media exposed to might present campaign information which differs in systematic ways from those party attitudes.

Figure 1 shows the proposed additions to Slater (2015: 374) graphic depiction of the RSM in bold. The figure strongly simplifies Slater's quite elaborate depiction. The figure here only shows one slice out of the reinforcing spiral process. In Slater's full model, media exposure influences attitudes which influence subsequent exposure, moderated by various background variables and fueled by identity threat. Instead, the focus of the figure here is on the two additions to the RSM described above. First, it adds the potential contribution of media agency in the form of the production (including its supply by outside actors) and selection of news. Media agency might alter media content, and accordingly changes the media one is actually exposed to. Second, the figure adds emotions more broadly, rather than just identity threat as a cause of selection. In addition, it depicts emotions as influencing the effects of exposure as well.

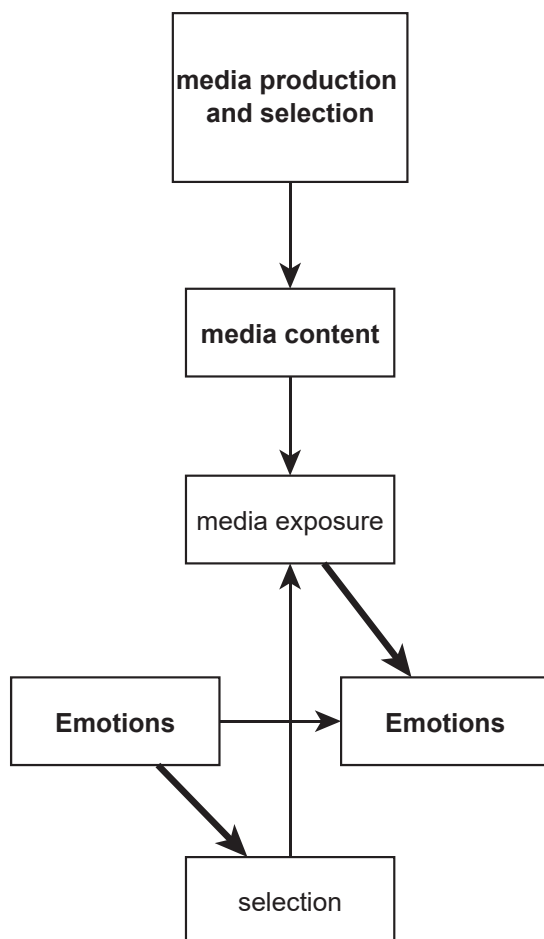


Figure 1. A simplified slice of the Reinforcing Spirals Model including media agency and emotions.

Set up of the dissertation

This PhD thesis will apply these additions to Slater's (2015) RSM to the bandwagon effect, and investigate them sequentially in three separate studies. Accordingly, it will seek to make three incremental steps in investigating the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect. Figure 2 schematically depicts the relation between the three studies and their main variables of interest. The figure should not be interpreted as a full causal model, it rather shows how each study investigates a specific addition to Slater's RSM within the context

of the bandwagon effect. Study 1 looks at news production and selection by examining how poll ratings influence subsequent party coverage. It thus investigates the role of media agency within the bandwagon effect. Study 2 investigates the role of interest within the relation between media selection and effects. Interest could help explain why exposure leads to selection in the RSM. Study 2 tests this notion by examining whether interest drives selection and whether it mediates the effects of exposure on behavior, by examining how poll coverage influences campaign interest and turnout. Hereby, it examines the existence of a bandwagon effect in turnout, with the excitement of polls increasing voter interest in the campaign resulting in higher turnout levels. Such an effect would be the opposite of poll related coverage leading to increased cynicism, which will be included as a control. Study 3 traces the influence of exposure on emotions and behavior as exemplified by the relation between poll coverage, emotions and vote choice.

Slater's RSM will thus be applied to the study of the bandwagon effect over the course of election campaigns by investigating how poll coverage might influence campaign interest, and whether interest influences the effects of poll coverage in turn. In addition, the conceptual mechanism of the RSM will be extended to include the possible effects of emotions and media agency. Media agency might influence party coverage, which in turn could affect voting behavior over time, and media exposure might trigger emotions that influence its effects.

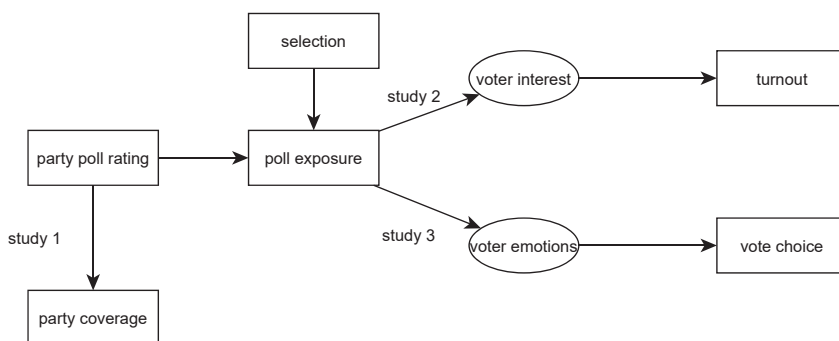


Figure 2. How the studies complement each other.

The results of these studies could directly affect the normative desirability of bandwagon effects. First, a possible mechanism behind the bandwagon effect

could be that polls affect party coverage, which in turn affects vote intentions, which affect polls. Early campaign polls might start off this process, which then becomes self-fulfilling. However, in those early stages of the campaign many voters have yet to make a definite voting decision and poll predictions are shown to be rather imprecise (Jennings & Wlezien, 2016)². In that case the particular early campaign poll standings might be considered somewhat arbitrary and a self-fulfilling spiral resulting from those standings would thus reduce meaningful voter participation. Second, the coverage of polls themselves might contribute to cynicism and reduce turnout, but might also increase interest in the campaign as voters are drawn in by the bandwagon effect. Voters find poll coverage more attractive and easier to understand than issue coverage (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004), so studying effects on campaign interest can serve to determine which effect is stronger. More voter involvement can be considered beneficial from a participatory democracy perspective, while increased cynicism would be undesirable. Third, studying the role of emotions in the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect is normatively important as it directly addresses its earliest critique of spurring a “rush on the part of the electorate” and leading to “mob action” (Robinson, 1937: 47). Emotions have often been contrasted with rational decision making and blamed for irrational behavior. However, as noted, recent research shows how emotions and cognitive reasoning are intimately intertwined rather than mutually exclusive (see Marcus, Neumann, & MacKuen, 2000). The role of emotions within the bandwagon effect may thus not only apply to contagion or gratification type effects, but also to all other bandwagon mechanisms described above.

Issues with cause and effect

Several methodological issues must be addressed to investigate the bandwagon effect over time within a media effects perspective and in a field setting. The most important one is to separate cause and effect. Going beyond previous research, studies in this dissertation treat several variables as potentially endogenous mediators within an evolving dynamic, rather than as

² Especially for first order election, early polls for second order elections are found to be much more informative.

exogenous moderators to an instantaneous effect. Poll ratings can both be a cause and consequence of changing vote intentions, likewise party coverage can be a cause and consequence of polls. Campaign interest might influence poll exposure, and poll exposure can lead to increased interest. Each of these variables will be examined in a separate study, with a design most conducive to determining its effect.

Ideally, to thoroughly study these question, one would use daily individual level data on poll exposure, party emotions, and vote and turnout intentions, in combinations with a full content analysis of party and poll coverage in all media to which individuals are exposed in the months leading up to the election. Unfortunately, such data does not (yet) exist and is way too expensive to collect. Therefore a few methodological tricks are required to adequately test the specified effects. For an optimal analysis the number of data points over time or across individual units requires a trade-off. To be able to generalize the findings a representative cross-sectional sample is needed, both of voters and media coverage. To study over-time processes data needs to be collected repeatedly over time for the same units of analysis.

Each of the studies in this dissertation makes a separate contribution. Study 1 goes beyond previous research designs in the way it deals with the relatedness of separate over-time processes within a campaign. Its design takes account of the differences in poll predictions across polling firms, and links party coverage of each party and in each outlet separately to each poll prediction. Study 2 concentrates on the influence of selection effects, as not everyone is equally likely to observe poll coverage in the first place, potentially leading to biased estimates. In addition, it will go beyond previous studies and model the selection process explicitly, including the drivers and consequences of selection apart from exposure itself. Study 3 uses an individual level poll exposure index, to help model the influence on voters of the portrayal of poll results in the media rather than taking the poll ratings at face value as is done in most previous studies. Each will be elaborated upon below.

Study 1: Polls and party coverage. Like poll coverage, party coverage in modern campaigns is spread out over a variety of outlets, time slots and newspaper sections. Measuring party coverage is somewhat easier, though, as it is present much more consistently. Especially the major parties are at least mentioned every day of the campaign in most of the prominent media slots. This makes it possible to derive a rather fine-grained, day-to-day indicator per

outlet. In order to relate this coverage to changes in poll ratings, this dissertation will go beyond previous studies and evaluate the effect of polls from seven different polling agencies separately for each of five parties in each of eleven outlets. To do so it will aggregate party coverage for each party, in each outlet, for each period between two consecutive polls by the same polling firm. Polling firms generally do not publish daily poll ratings, and if they do, they often use their samples from multiple days to arrive at their estimate (so called “tracking polls”, see Searles, Ginn, & Nickens, 2016). Therefore, the design of this study forsakes a day-to-day analysis of effects of polls on party coverage, in order to get a more precise estimate of the effect of polls on party coverage across the period until the next poll.

Study 2: Poll exposure, campaign interest and turnout. To arrive at a better understanding of the role of selection processes within the bandwagon effect, study 2 in this dissertation investigates what background characteristics drive individual selection to poll exposure, and whether poll exposure increases interest in the campaign and political participation, in the form of turnout, or whether it merely breeds cynicism. The main causal issue in this study is to adequately separate the effects of selection from those of exposure. Eligible voters who are uninterested in the campaign and have no intention of voting, might also be least likely to consume the kind of media that report polls. They might, for example, be more interested in watching a soccer game or reality soap on a different channel. Consequently, any study that identifies a difference in turnout in line with a difference in poll exposure, might simply grasp this selection effect of uninterested voters avoiding both poll exposure and the act of voting. The standard way of dealing with this issue is to use a panel design and look at within voter changes in campaign interest and turnout intention with respect to poll coverage. Do individuals who are exposed to polls become more interested and likely to vote compared to before the campaign and compared to individuals who are not exposed? However, this approach has two main disadvantages. First, some people might be more likely to increase their interest and turnout intention across the campaign than others, and this increase is likely to be related to an increased likelihood of exposure to poll coverage. Second, by controlling for pre-campaign attitudes and turnout intentions it is difficult to establish how these pre-campaign attitudes contributed to turnout *via* self-selection into poll exposure (see Slater, 2015). These issues will be addressed by using

a unique four wave dataset, with three waves before the campaign and one wave after. The first three waves are used to determine each individual's likelihood of exposure based on pre-campaign interest and turnout intention as well as a host of other factors which might affect likely *changes* in interest and turnout intention across the campaign. Following Imai and Ratkovic (2014), the likelihood of exposure will be calculated as a Covariate Balancing Propensity Score (CBPS). This CBPS can be used as a control variable to deal with selection effect, but within a dynamic, over time, framework this would be suboptimal. Instead, this study will go beyond previous research and integrate the CBPS as a separate variable within a structural equation model in order to separately estimate three different, but related, processes. The model will first of all show which variables predict CBPS, and thus are the main determinants of poll selection processes. Second, it will show what the effects of selection are on interest and turnout, and third, it will show what contribution actual poll exposure has on interest and turnout apart from selection effects. In this way a fuller picture emerges of how the dynamics of these media effects work.

Study 3: Poll exposure, emotions and vote choice. Assessing poll exposure over time is challenging, as poll coverage is spread out over a multitude of print, TV and online outlets and within those outlets across a variety of sections, shows, and tabs, each of which can refer to polls from different polling firms and interpret them independently or in relation to each other. The poll coverage to which each individual voter is exposed depends on which outlets are read or seen. Single TV shows or newspaper sections do not usually interpret or even mention all polls for all parties each day, but instead report on a selected set of new polls and usually only when they are released. Consequently, calculating a uniform daily poll coverage indicator to which each individual can be more or less exposed might be misleading. Instead, in study 3 of this dissertation, poll coverage is sampled from the most prominent news slots in the most prominent outlets, and then aggregated over the course of the campaign. In this way differences in exposure between individuals can still be distinguished, though at the cost of losing the day-to-day, over-time development of coverage. By integrating these content analyses data with panel survey data of individual media exposure, attitudes and behaviors, a basic over-time effect of poll coverage during the campaign as a whole can be investigated.

To study how emotions mediate the bandwagon effect of poll exposure on vote choice, a two wave panel survey is used to measure attitudes and behaviors both before and after the campaign. Everything which happened in between the survey waves can account for differences in responses and is therefore treated as a large and complex, but single stimulus. This design allows to compare emotions felt towards parties from before the campaign with those at the end of the campaign, and relate these changes to the poll coverage to which each individual is exposed. A major strength of this design compared to earlier field studies is that it allows a stronger causal test of the effect of poll coverage on vote choice. As argued, journalists have some leeway in how they present poll results. In addition, individuals differ into which media outlets they select and how often. The individual level poll exposure across the campaign can thus be different from the aggregate changes in poll ratings which were recorded over the same period. This difference can help to sort whether polls simply measure changes in vote intention that have already taken place, making their effect on vote choice spurious, or whether they, through poll coverage, also influence vote choice.

Arguably both effects may be present, so distinguishing one from the other is not easy. Still, changes in poll ratings reach voters via the media and the consequences of media coverage and other campaign events on vote intentions are registered in polls. Therefore, the effect of poll *coverage* on vote choice while controlling for the effect of poll *ratings* on vote choice represents the effect of journalist's selection and interpretation of polls on the election outcome apart from aggregate level factors like campaign events. The estimate found in this way represents a lower bound, as the aggregate effect of poll coverage on the electorate as a whole will be registered as a change in poll ratings, and thus be controlled for. Only the individual level differences in coverage are related to changes in vote choice. If an individual thus changes her vote intention in response to poll coverage, but in line with aggregate level changes within the electorate as a whole, these changes are not taken up as effects of poll coverage within this design. The analysis rather compares how differences in exposure *between* individuals lead to differences *within* individuals in vote choice over time.

In this study, the role of emotions (enthusiasm versus anxiety) will also be investigated. It is likely that the effect of emotions materializes at a shorter timeframe than across an entire campaign, but the goal of this study is to set

a first step in describing the role of emotions within the effect of polls on vote choice. Analyzing how emotions change across a campaign and relating this, on an individual basis, to poll coverage may help to see whether emotions have a separate effect apart from cognitive predictors of vote choice used in standard voting models, or whether emotions matter rather to explain how these cognitive predictors change over time. Future studies can take an even closer look and investigate how emotions influence the dynamics of the bandwagon effect over the day-to-day course of the campaign and how they influence cognitive processes and interpretations.

Together, these three studies thus contribute methodologically by presenting new designs that incorporate differences between poll rating and poll coverage, between polls from different polling firms and party coverage in different outlets, between individual selection into poll exposure and effects of poll exposure, and between individual affective responses to poll coverage and aggregate level changes in vote intention. These designs contribute to investigating the bandwagon effect as a dynamic, over time, process of media selection and effects.

Case selection

The studies in this dissertation are based on two specific cases: Study 1 and 3 investigate the German 2013 Federal election campaign to the “Bundestag”, and study 2 examines the Dutch 2014 elections to the European Parliament (EP). In addition, study 2 is based on a representative sample of young voters, who are allowed to vote for the first time. Investigating how political participation develops within this group is of special importance, as their turnout rates are notoriously low within western democracies (see Phelps, 2005). Voting is shown to be a habitual process, so if this habit is not instigated among this group, this represents a threat for the future functioning of democracy from a participatory perspective (Franklin, 2004). Study 3 uses a, more standard, representative sample of the German electorate as a whole, which is more appropriate when gauging the effects of poll coverage on the outcome of the election.

These two settings are similar as they are both multi-party elections based on (a form of) proportional representation. Most research into the bandwagon

effect in election campaigns have been conducted in two candidate/party settings (Schmitt-Beck, 2015). In multi-party settings, effects are likely to be more relevant. Especially in those using proportional representation shifts in size of party support have more direct consequences compared to two candidate races like those for the US presidency. Under proportional representation, more votes mean more seats in parliament and usually a stronger bargaining position for coalition formations. In addition, the number of voters preferring a different party from the projected winner is larger under such settings. Therefore the number of voters that may potentially alter their vote intention following a poll is also larger. On the other hand, the effects of polls can be more complex as media can report in a non-zero-sum way about the poll results in such elections: there can be multiple winners. Outperforming expectations and coming in second can be an important victory with direct consequences for the likely governing coalition to be formed.

Chapter outline

As mentioned above, this dissertation consists of three studies, each presented in a different chapter. The studies share polls as the independent variable, and examine their consequences on a different dependent variable. They are ordered along the causal chain from polls to election outcomes. Starting with media agenda building in chapter 1, turnout in chapter 2 and vote choice in chapter 3. In chapter 1 a potential driver of the bandwagon effect is tested, in the form of the role of polls within the media agenda building process. The study presented examines how poll ratings influence subsequent party coverage. Such an effect can be considered an extreme case of media influence in the bandwagon. Taking party coverage as a dependent variable is extreme, as it does not just consider media influence on the mechanism behind the bandwagon effect through the way they report on and discuss polls, but also in the way they might use polls to arrange news on parties which is not directly related to the polls in question.

Chapter 1 thus investigates a potential way in which such a bandwagon effect could come about over time. Chapters 2 and 3 take a broader look by considering the effects of the election campaign as a whole on the two main outcome variables related to the effects of polls on election outcomes: turnout

and vote choice. In order to influence the election outcome by voting for a party, one first has to show up at the voting booth. This is the subject of chapter 2, which studies whether poll exposure can influence interest in the campaign and overall turnout.

Chapter 3 then evaluates the party political consequences of polls on the election outcome. While chapter 1 uses a content analysis to examine effects of polls on media content, and chapter 2 uses a panel survey to track the effects of poll exposure over time, chapter 3 combines a panel survey with the media content analysis to individually track the relation between the (positive/negative) tone of poll exposure regarding each party, emotions and vote choice. Turnout can also play an important role within this potential bandwagon effect of polls on vote choice. When turnout increases more within the group of supporters of one party compared to another, this can have important consequences for the election outcome. Such a potential effect is especially interesting, as the literature on media effects emphasizes that attitude reinforcement is just as important in persuasion compared to attitude formation and change (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). This aspect of turnout is included in the design of study 3.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation integrates the results of these studies within the RSM and bandwagon frameworks outlined above, and discusses their methodological and normative implications, and proposes an agenda for future research.