

Voting Behavior

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This entry explores the role of media and communication on voting behavior offering a critical comparison of key theoretical approaches to elucidate their scope and underlying mechanisms. The evolution of these theories is traced highlighting how they address media persuasion and audience selectivity in diverse media environments. This discussion extends to examining the media's influence on electoral turnout and vote choice and considers the implications of digital transformation and the emergence of generative AI on political communication. The entry concludes by highlighting the need for comprehensive analyses of generative algorithms and emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary research in understanding voting behavior in a digital world.

Voting behavior; Political communication; Media effects; Electoral democracy; Media transformation; Generative AI

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This entry delves into media and communication accounts of voting behavior, contrasting various theoretical approaches, and examining their scope and mechanisms. I then I assess the influence of media and communication on electoral turnout and vote choices, concluding with insights on the emerging interplay of digital transformation, generative AI, and electoral democracy.

Voting, a pivotal act in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, involves the decision to participate or abstain and the subsequent choice of candidates, parties, or policies. This process is closely linked to socially contingent communication and media dynamics.

Although extensively analyzed in Western democracies, these dynamics are equally pertinent in non-WEIRD societies, encompassing diverse forms of political communication, from tribal networks to state-controlled media, necessitating context-aware analysis.

The evolution of media technologies has continually reshaped theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. The print media era underscored the role of opinion leaders and interpersonal networks. The introduction of television redirected scholarly attention towards political leaders and policy issues. The digital era has once more reshaped political communication processes delivering a hybrid media environment where old and new media coexist, interact, and influence each other. This digital transformation redefined political campaigning and discourse, enabling interactive two-way communications, and challenging traditional information gatekeepers.

Theoretical Approaches to Voting and Turnout Behavior

Communication theories of voting can be classified identifying three foundational elements of the relationship of media and politics. First, each theory is contextually-dependent on a media environment with specific technological features, actors, and norms. Media environments are dynamic and can include multiple technologies and platforms. They also differ in terms of choice availability and political parallelism since media actors and outlets may bias the coverage of current affairs to favor their political referents. As such, media environments are not only central to institutional and comparative accounts but constitute ground mechanisms through which media and communication affect voting. Second, theories of voting may address exogenous processes of media persuasion on citizens' perceptions, evaluations, attitudes, and behaviors. The inclusion of media and communication as exogenous factors shaping individual behaviors is landmark of communication approaches to public opinion. Finally, theories may address endogenous processes of self-selection, or

avoidance, of political information based on citizens' preferences and predispositions. Psychological mechanisms such as identity-protective thinking, cognitive dissonance, and motivated reasoning, are factors limiting media effects in conditions of choice availability. The entanglement of media persuasion and self-selection, in a specified media environment, lies at the hearth of all communication theories of voting. On this premise, Table 1 contrasts a selection of communication theories of opinion formation and voting.

[\[Table 1 about here\]](#)

The organizing principle adopted in Table 1 offers a higher-level standpoint revealing important trends. Technological advancements have significantly broadened the range of media alternatives, rendering low-choice media theories obsolete. In today's digital media environment, individual agency extends beyond content selectivity, as users actively shape information as producers and spreaders, influenced by algorithmic mediation. Contemporary studies of hybrid media environments acknowledge this dynamic, focusing on both the direct psychological mechanisms of media persuasion and self-selection, and the indirect algorithmic-mediation of news selection. Currently, LLM systems like ChatGPT and similar generative AIs offer personalized news access/creation, along with summarization and explanation capabilities. This development underscores the need for comprehensive analyses of generative algorithms as customized information sources.

Influence of Political Communication on Electoral Turnout

In the 1940s, the Columbia group, led by Paul Lazarsfeld, hypothesized three key effects of political communication: mobilization (activating voter attention), polarization (attitude reinforcement), and persuasion (attitude conversion). Their 'limited effects' finding indicated that print and radio at the time were primarily effective in mobilizing voters. Similarly, the diffusion of television news in the 1950s and 1960s was connected to greater political knowledge and engagement. However, recent decades have seen a rise in news sources and selective media consumption, amplifying the knowledge gap between voter groups, thereby influencing turnout. Overall, scholars align with two perspectives: media malaise theory, which argues that profit-driven media foster negativity and disengagement, connects declining turnout rates with growing misinformation, personal attacks, and negative tone of coverage, and the civic education and media literacy theories, exemplified by the case of

Nigeria's 1976 universal primary education reform leading to long-term political engagement and attentiveness (Larreguy and Marshall 2017), underscore potential of virtuous cycles between media and the political arena. The advent of digital and social media had sparked renewed expectations of political modernization, activism, and engagement.

Initial observations, such as social media's role in mobilizing the Arab Spring protests, suggested that new media could facilitate political mobilization and attentiveness to political issues. However, the rise of misinformation campaigns and hate speech campaigns on these platforms was also connected to greater distrust and disengagement. In sum, while social media present opportunities for revitalizing electoral participation through enhanced engagement and mobilization, it also necessitates a cautious approach to safeguarding electoral integrity and promoting informed, discerning participation among voters.

Influence of Political Communication on Vote Choice

Media transformation has significantly shaped scholarly perspectives regarding voting choices. In modern democracies, media is the primary information source for voters, an element making the media-voter interaction critical for vote choice theories. Early experimental studies, like those by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), effectively separated exogenous media persuasion from individual self-selection, highlighting broadcast television's significant persuasive impact. Such large persuasion effects were connected to the limited number, and homogenous nature, of the available news channels. However, the expansion of satellite and commercial TV introduced more diverse choices, leading to an increased selectivity of news sources and a 'new era' of limited media effects. Among the theories reviewed in Table 1, some more prominently link media exposure to voting behavior. In particular, agenda-setting theory highlights media's role in shaping the public's perception of the importance of political issues. Priming theory suggests that media directly influence the criteria by which voters evaluate parties and candidates in voting decisions. Additionally, framing studies demonstrate how media can alter voters' perceptions by presenting news stories within different reference frames. These theories underscore the profound and variegated impacts of media on the electoral decision-making process. Historically, the scientific exploration of media effects has primarily focused on the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Nevertheless, media's electoral impact in developing democracies may be more substantial. In these settings, where state structures and electoral democratic institutions are more fragile, narrow interest and power groups can more easily

capture media undermining the democratic process. A notable example of this dynamic is a study conducted in Peru by McMillan and Zoido (2004). Examining revealed preferences, the study compared the bribes paid by Montesinos, the secret-police chief in 1990s Peru, to television channels with those given to judges and politicians, thereby serving as a proxy for institutional checks on government. The finding that the typical bribe paid to TV owners was about one hundred times larger than the bribe paid to a judge or a politician supports the view of news media as the strongest check on government's power.

The emergence of new media, characterized by algorithmic-driven content, has redirected scholarly attention towards how these technologies enable users to select or create content that aligns with their preferences. This shift links to phenomena such as micro-targeted political advertising and selective negative campaigning, contributing to the creation of echo chambers that polarize political views (Tucker et al. 2018). The 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the United States Capitol attack of January 6, 2021, underscore the need for social media platforms to counteract harmful actors and misinformation, a trend that will prove to be critical in 2024, when more than half of the world's population will head to the polls. In response, new media literacy interventions are needed to educate users about algorithmic deceptions and misinformation, fostering political engagement and a more pragmatic and collaborative political discourse.

Conclusion

The interplay between political communication and voting is crucial for democracies worldwide. Understanding this complex relationship is vital, not just scholarly, but for nurturing engaged and resilient electoral democracies. As technological innovation accelerates in the 21st century, it is essential for scholars and practitioners to unravel how political communication influences voting in evolving media environments. Future research should lean towards cross-cultural studies, addressing how cultural specificities moderate media change, while tackling new challenges posed by generative AIs and deepfakes. Adapting methodologies and theoretical frameworks to rapidly evolving media landscapes has been a significant challenge in the past decades. The integration, or collision, of AI into electoral democracy introduces new layers of complexity leading to algorithmically generated political content. This shift could necessitate a paradigm change in theoretical approaches. Instead of subgroup causal analysis, future frameworks might need to account for idiosyncratic causal variability, where causal effects do not vary by any discernible subgroup

but only by unique individual characteristics, or even causal entropy, an extreme form of heterogeneity where causal structures emerge from complex interactions unique to individuals and sensitive to initial states.

Future research should adopt a holistic understanding of voter behavior, integrating socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors for a more nuanced insight into the dynamics of political communication and voting. This requires interdisciplinary collaboration, combining expertise from political science, communication studies, psychology, and information technology, among others.

In conclusion, the study of political communication and voting stands at a critical juncture. As we advance, the responsibility falls on both scholars and practitioners to foster a research environment that not only understands current complexities but also anticipates emerging trends and challenges. Concerted efforts and collaborative research are crucial for reinforcing the role of political communication as a key facilitator for an informed, engaged, and discerning citizenry. The advancement of this field is fundamental in fortifying the foundations of democratic governance.

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Table 1. Context and mechanisms of media and communication theories

Theory	Media environment and bias	Exogenous persuasion (media effects)	Endogenous self-selection (selective audiences)
Two-Step Flow Theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944)	Newspaper and radio era: low fragmentation and choice-availability, minimal cross-usage of media platforms. Media bias determined by social structures.	Small direct effects of media: media influence mediated by opinion leaders and interpersonal networks.	Large self-selection: political campaigns mainly activate and reinforce prior attitudes with minor conversion effects.
Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972)	Broadcast television era: low fragmentation, cross-usage, and choice-availability. Low bias due to professional norms and consensus on news value.	Large effects: media sets the public agenda.	Low selectivity: voters are exposed to news regardless of political predispositions.
Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973)	Versatility of media as satisfaction source: high cross-usage and fragmentation.	No substantial effort to connect media gratifications and media effects.	High selectivity functional to needs satisfaction.
Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann 1974)	Broadcast television era: moderate fragmentation, media choice and cross-usage. Media bias from perceptions of social dominance.	Substantial power of media to “create” public opinion offering socially dominant opinions.	Low ability to self-select due to fear of isolation.
Media Malaise theories (Robinson 1976)	Broadcast television era: growing commercialization linking media contents and advertising revenues.	Large media effects fostering disengagement and low participation.	High selectivity into negative and sensationalistic news. Self-displacement of

Theory	Media environment and bias	Exogenous persuasion (media effects)	Endogenous self-selection (selective audiences)
		Negativity bias in news coverage.	socially-binding activities.
Priming Theory <i>(Iyengar and Kinder 1987)</i>	Broadcast television era with limited choice availability.	Large effects of television priming certain evaluation criteria for political judgments.	Moderate self-selection affecting the extent of priming effects.
Framing Effects Theory <i>(Entman 1993)</i>	Post-broadcast and early Internet era: increasing fragmentation and choice availability, and early hybridity with emergence of the Internet. Media bias from power struggle over alternative frames.	Large effects of media framing issues in particular ways that influence audience perceptions.	Low selectivity and vulnerability to dominant frames.
Mobilization and Virtuous Cycle theories <i>(Norris 2000)</i>	Throughout multiple eras political journalism and public media reinforce civic engagement.	Large media effects fostering civic activism and participation.	Active citizens create a self-reinforcing cycle of informed and engaged citizenry.
Political Economy Theories of Media <i>(Mosco 2009; McChesney 2008)</i>	Tackles structures of media production/consumption across multiple media era (varying fragmentation, bias, and cross-usage/hybridity).	Large effects: market competition and ownership structures influence media content and bias.	High selectivity in competitive markets (low concentration).
Network Agenda Setting Theory	Social media era: high fragmentation, choice, and hybridity. Network	Large effects: networks expand	Audience engagement influenced by network

Theory	Media environment and bias	Exogenous persuasion (media effects)	Endogenous self-selection (selective audiences)
<i>(Guo and McCombs 2016)</i>	configurations can bias issue saliency.	classic agenda-setting effects.	relationships and social media connections.
Selective exposure and echo chamber theories <i>(Sunstein 2017)</i>	Social media era: polarizing actors and high network homophily.	Minimal effects of media: large activation and reinforcement effects driven by prior predispositions.	Very high and repeated self-selectivity.
Computational Propaganda and Filter Bubble Theories <i>(Woolley and Howard 2019; Pariser 2012)</i>	Social media era: algorithmic-driven fragmentation, choice, bias, and discrimination.	Large algorithmic-driven persuasion and manipulation effects (newsfeeds, content customization, micro-targeting...)	Filter bubbles with inescapable self-selection.
Personalization of voting <i>(Garzia, da Silva, and De Angelis 2021)</i>	Various eras with varying compositions of text vs. visual information formats.	Visual forms of communication increase leader-centrality in turnout and voting.	Self-selection driven by favorite format of information leading to varying degrees of leader- vs. issue-centrality in voting.