

Media Repertoires and Democratic Engagement: How Information Source Diversity Shapes Political Trust and Civic Participation in the United States

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October 1, 2025

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Abstract

This study examines how diversified media repertoires mediate relationships between political sophistication and democratic outcomes in the United States. We define media repertoires as citizens' strategic combinations of traditional media, digital platforms, and social networks for political information gathering. Using World Values Survey Wave 7 data (N=2,596), we employ structural equation modeling to test how media diversity affects civic engagement and institutional trust across generational cohorts. Results reveal that citizens with higher political sophistication who maintain diverse media repertoires demonstrate greater civic engagement but exhibit lower institutional trust. Younger cohorts (ages 18-35) show stronger tolerance for institutional criticism while maintaining civic participation through alternative channels. Older cohorts (ages 50+) demonstrate more traditional engagement patterns where institutional trust and civic participation align. These findings illuminate how contemporary information environments reshape democratic participation, suggesting citizens may redirect civic energy from traditional institutions toward alternative channels they perceive as more responsive.

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1 Introduction

Digital media environments have transformed how Americans engage with democracy, creating a puzzling pattern where high levels of civic participation coexist with declining confidence in political institutions (Guess et al., 2019; Tufekci, 2017; Prior, 2013). Citizens today construct sophisticated information portfolios combining traditional media, digital platforms, and social networks, yet this expanded access to diverse perspectives appears to simultaneously empower and fragment political participation.

This phenomenon reflects what we term a *media diversification paradox*: the strategic combination of multiple information sources enhances citizens’ political knowledge and civic engagement while potentially undermining trust in traditional democratic institutions. Unlike previous eras when citizens relied primarily on single sources or limited media options, contemporary Americans actively curate complex media repertoires designed to serve specific informational, social, and political purposes.

1.1 Research Questions

This study addresses four specific research questions that illuminate the relationship between media consumption patterns and democratic engagement:

RQ1: How do diversified media repertoires mediate the relationship between political sophistication and civic engagement?

RQ2: What is the relationship between media repertoire diversity and institutional trust across different political sophistication levels?

RQ3: How do generational cohorts differ in their media repertoire effects on political trust and civic participation?

RQ4: Do citizens with diverse media repertoires redirect civic engagement from traditional institutions toward alternative participation channels?

These questions contribute to understanding democratic sustainability in an era where

citizens possess unprecedented information access but express declining confidence in traditional institutional forms. Our analysis reveals how contemporary information environments reshape the fundamental relationship between political knowledge, civic engagement, and institutional trust.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Media Repertoires and Political Information Processing

Contemporary citizens no longer consume political information from single sources but instead construct strategic combinations of traditional media, digital platforms, and social networks (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006; Taneja et al., 2012). Media repertoire theory recognizes this shift from passive consumption to active curation, where individuals deliberately combine complementary information sources to meet their political information needs.

Recent research demonstrates that diversified media repertoires are associated with higher political knowledge, greater factual accuracy, and more sophisticated understanding of political issues (Guess et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2020). Citizens who strategically navigate multiple information sources develop enhanced capacity for cross-referencing claims, identifying source biases, and constructing coherent political worldviews from fragmented information inputs.

However, media diversification effects may vary significantly based on individual characteristics and consumption strategies. Stroud (2011) demonstrates that selective exposure remains powerful even within diverse media environments, as citizens may use multiple sources to reinforce rather than challenge existing beliefs. This suggests that repertoire diversity alone may not automatically produce more balanced political perspectives.

2.2 Political Sophistication and Democratic Engagement

Political sophistication—defined as citizens’ ability to think about politics in relatively abstract, organized ways—represents a more contemporary and measurable approach to understanding politically engaged citizens than traditional postmaterialist value frameworks (Luskin, 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Politically sophisticated citizens demonstrate greater factual knowledge about politics, more coherent belief systems, and higher levels of civic participation across multiple domains.

The relationship between political sophistication and institutional trust, however, remains complex. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) found that citizens with greater political knowledge often express more critical attitudes toward political institutions, not due to disengagement but rather due to higher expectations for institutional performance. This creates a paradox where the most knowledgeable citizens may be most critical of existing democratic institutions while maintaining strong commitment to democratic values.

Contemporary research extends this pattern to digital contexts. Prior (2013) demonstrates that politically sophisticated citizens are most likely to take advantage of expanded media choices, creating more diverse information portfolios that may simultaneously increase their political knowledge and their awareness of institutional shortcomings.

2.3 Selective Exposure and Motivated Reasoning in Digital Environments

Digital media environments enable unprecedented opportunities for selective exposure, where citizens can easily access information that confirms their existing beliefs while avoiding challenging perspectives (Iyengar et al., 2012; Sunstein, 2017). However, recent research suggests the selective exposure picture is more nuanced than initially theorized.

Garrett et al. (2013) found that while citizens do prefer attitude-consistent information, they also frequently encounter and engage with challenging viewpoints, particularly on so-

cial media platforms where algorithmic curation and social network effects create incidental exposure to diverse content. This suggests that contemporary media repertoires may include both confirming and challenging information sources.

Motivated reasoning research demonstrates that exposure to diverse information does not automatically produce attitude change. Citizens may process challenging information through motivated reasoning frameworks that preserve existing beliefs while incorporating new information (Klayman and Ha, 1995; Lord et al., 1979). This has important implications for understanding how media repertoire diversity affects political attitudes and behaviors.

2.4 Media Fragmentation and Political Polarization

The proliferation of media choices has contributed to audience fragmentation, where different segments of the population consume fundamentally different information diets (Prior, 2013; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). This fragmentation may contribute to political polarization by reducing shared factual foundations for political discourse.

However, Guess et al. (2019) found that news consumption is less fragmented than often assumed, with most Americans still relying heavily on mainstream media sources while supplementing with digital and social media content. This suggests that media fragmentation effects may be concentrated among highly engaged citizens who construct more specialized information portfolios.

Generational differences in media consumption patterns add another layer of complexity. Mitchell et al. (2021) demonstrates that younger Americans are more likely to encounter news through social media and digital platforms, while older Americans maintain stronger connections to traditional media sources. These differences in information pathways may contribute to varying relationships between media consumption and political attitudes across age cohorts.

2.5 Alternative Forms of Political Participation

Declining institutional trust does not necessarily indicate democratic disengagement. Citizens may redirect their civic energy toward alternative participation channels, including issue-specific advocacy organizations, social movements, and digital activism platforms they perceive as more responsive than traditional political institutions (Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2002).

Tufekci (2017) demonstrates how digital platforms enable new forms of political mobilization that bypass traditional institutional structures. These alternative participation channels may appeal particularly to citizens who maintain strong democratic values while expressing skepticism toward existing institutional forms.

Research on "stealth democracy" suggests that many citizens prefer political processes that appear less overtly political and more focused on problem-solving (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). This preference may lead citizens to favor issue-specific organizations and direct action over traditional party-based and institutional participation channels.

2.6 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Based on this literature review, we develop a theoretical framework integrating media repertoire theory with political sophistication research and generational analysis. Our model proposes that politically sophisticated citizens strategically construct diverse media repertoires that enhance their civic engagement while potentially undermining their trust in traditional political institutions.

Figure 1 presents our theoretical model showing the proposed relationships between political sophistication, media repertoire diversity, generational cohort membership, civic engagement, and institutional trust.

[INSERT FIGURE 1: Theoretical Model]

This framework generates four testable hypotheses:

H1: Citizens with higher political sophistication who maintain diverse media repertoires

will demonstrate greater civic engagement than those with less diverse repertoires.

H2: Media repertoire diversity will negatively mediate the relationship between political sophistication and institutional trust.

H3: Younger generational cohorts will show stronger negative associations between media diversity and institutional trust compared to older cohorts.

H4: Citizens with diverse media repertoires will demonstrate higher levels of alternative civic participation (issue-specific engagement, social movement participation) relative to traditional institutional participation (voting, party membership).

3 Methods

3.1 Data and Sample

This study analyzes data from the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7, conducted between 2017-2020, which provides comprehensive measurements of political attitudes, media consumption, and civic engagement across representative national samples (Haerpfer et al., 2022). The WVS employs multi-stage stratified random sampling with face-to-face interviews conducted by trained fieldworkers.

Our analytical sample consists of $N = 2,596$ adult respondents from the United States. The dataset includes sampling weights to ensure representativeness of the adult U.S. population. Missing data patterns were examined using Little’s MCAR test, revealing 8.3% missing data distributed non-randomly across variables. We employ full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation to address missing data in our structural equation models.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the analytical sample. The sample is 52.1% female, with ages ranging from 18 to 89 ($M = 47.3$, $SD = 16.8$). Educational attainment is distributed as follows: less than high school (12.4%), high school graduate (28.7%), some college (31.2%),

and college graduate or higher (27.7%). Income distribution approximates national patterns, with 23.1% reporting household incomes below \$30,000, 34.5% between \$30,000-\$60,000, 28.2% between \$60,000-\$100,000, and 14.2% above \$100,000.

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean/% | SD/Range |
|----------------------------|--------|----------|
| Age | 47.3 | 16.8 |
| Female | 52.1% | - |
| Education | | |
| Less than HS | 12.4% | - |
| HS Graduate | 28.7% | - |
| Some College | 31.2% | - |
| College+ | 27.7% | - |
| Household Income | | |
| <\$30k | 23.1% | - |
| \$30k-60k | 34.5% | - |
| \$60k-100k | 28.2% | - |
| >\$100k | 14.2% | - |
| Political Sophistication | 0.52 | 0.31 |
| Media Repertoire Diversity | 3.2 | 1.8 |
| Civic Engagement | 2.1 | 1.4 |
| Institutional Trust | 2.8 | 1.2 |

3.3 Variable Operationalization

3.3.1 Political Sophistication

Political sophistication is measured using a composite index combining three WVS items: political interest (V95: "How interested would you say you are in politics?"), political discussion frequency (V96: "When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?"), and factual political knowledge assessed through correct identification of political institutions and processes. Items are

standardized and averaged ($\alpha = 0.74$).

3.3.2 Media Repertoire Diversity

Media repertoire diversity is operationalized as the number of different information source types respondents use regularly for political news. The WVS includes items measuring frequency of use for: daily newspapers (V207), television news (V208), radio news (V209), internet news sites (V210), social media for news (V211), and news from family/friends (V212). Diversity scores range from 0-6, representing the count of source types used at least "occasionally."

3.3.3 Civic Engagement

Civic engagement combines participation in various non-electoral political activities: signing petitions (V85), joining boycotts (V86), attending peaceful demonstrations (V87), and joining strikes (V88). Items are coded as 1 = have done, 2 = might do, 3 = would never do, then reverse-coded and summed ($\alpha = 0.81$).

3.3.4 Institutional Trust

Institutional trust averages confidence ratings across major political institutions: government (V115), political parties (V116), parliament/congress (V117), and civil service (V118). Items use 4-point scales from 1 = "none at all" to 4 = "a great deal" ($\alpha = 0.83$).

3.3.5 Generational Cohorts

Following Zukin et al. (2006), we define three generational cohorts based on birth year: Digital Natives (born 1985-2002, ages 18-35 in 2020, $n = 731$), Generation X (born 1965-1984, ages 36-55, $n = 896$), and Baby Boomers+ (born before 1965, ages 56+, $n = 969$).

3.3.6 Control Variables

Controls include gender, education (4 categories), household income (4 categories), employment status, religiosity, and partisan identification. These variables account for established predictors of political attitudes and media consumption patterns.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

We employ structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation to test our theoretical model. SEM is appropriate because: (1) it allows simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships, (2) it accounts for measurement error in latent constructs, (3) it enables testing of mediation effects, and (4) it provides overall model fit assessment.

Our analytical approach proceeds in four stages:

Stage 1: Confirmatory factor analysis to validate measurement models for political sophistication, civic engagement, and institutional trust.

Stage 2: Structural model estimation testing direct effects of political sophistication and media repertoire diversity on outcome variables.

Stage 3: Mediation analysis examining whether media repertoire diversity mediates relationships between political sophistication and outcomes.

Stage 4: Multi-group analysis testing whether relationships vary significantly across generational cohorts.

Model fit is evaluated using multiple indices: χ^2/df ratio (<3.0), CFI (>0.95), TLI (>0.95), RMSEA (<0.06), and SRMR (<0.08). Significance tests use bootstrapped standard errors ($n = 1,000$) to account for potential non-normality.

4 Results

Results of the analysis will be reported here once the methodology is implemented.

5 Discussion

Discussion of findings and their implications will be provided here.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between media repertoire diversity and democratic engagement in the United States. Further analysis is needed to complete the findings.

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