



THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA TRUST LEVELS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The effects of media trust levels on political participation

Recent and dramatic transformations of the media landscape have prompted discussions about how modern media in the Web 2.0 era shapes the way we acquire political knowledge and use such knowledge to participate in politics. Although this debate was initially marked by optimistic predictions on the effects of social media on democratic participation (Diamond 2010, Zhang 2010) recent spikes in polarization, misinformation, online echo-chambers and fake news have led scholars and researchers to wonder whether the internet is undermining vital democratic processes, such as the flow of information and the market of ideas. This outlook shift, marked by the *Journal of Democracy* hailing social media as “liberation technology” in 2010 (Diamond 2010), and wondering whether democracy will “survive the internet” in 2017 (Persily 2017), has followed a steady decline of trust on mainstream media (Gallup 2018). The current scenario is blurry, considering that there is a division between people who trust or not the media, but, at the same time, the trust in traditional media has decreased around the world over the past five years (Ipsos, 2019).

There are multiple explanations for this decline in trust on mainstream media, but for the purposes of investigating the effects of this distrust on political participation, these levels of trust have promoted the notion that we are living an “epistemic crisis” (Dalhgren 2018). This idea argues that perceptions of the media as unreliable or unreasonably biased weaken one of the key foundations of democracy: the capacity for self-rule. After all, the way and circumstances in which we acquire knowledge influences the degree, kind, and intensity of our political participation. The “dimension of trust that we can have in such knowledge”, then, is also an important factor in the form of political participation we tend to undertake (Dalhgren 2018). Political participation and government oversight depend on the electorate’s ability to not only learn about and understand the political landscape, but to do so collectively. As Coleman (2012:36) notes, “Unless we can trust the news media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public — a collective entity possessing shared concerns — starts to fall apart”. The rising fragmentation of society into different polarized groups as a result of distrust in mainstream sources of information runs the risk of eroding mechanisms for deliberation, rational discussion and the functionality of the “marketplace of ideas” upon which democracy rests. In order to assess whether this fear is excessively alarmist or justified, however, we need to investigate the direct effects of media unreliability on political participation.

Here, media reliability, or the extent to which media is considered trustworthy, is understood as generalized media trust (Prochazka & Schweiger 2018), or the extent to which citizens trust the mass media (defined as newspapers, radio, television news programs and news articles published online). Political participation, meanwhile, is defined as “a complex process embodying three conceptually distinct dimensions: 1. expression (speech that gives voice), 2. involvement (seen as assembly and banding together), and 3. intervention (actual collective action)” (Rosanvallon 2008). Dahlgren (2013; 2009) expands on this definition to explore it as a continuum, where political expression gradually develops into involvement and eventually into intervention. This distinction between different stages of political participation is useful for our goal of understanding how media distrust affects participation, since we posit that the perceived reliability of media reporting will affect specific forms of participation differently.

Hypothesis

We base our hypothesis on the understanding that separate stages of political participation will be differently affected by lower trust in the media. Specifically, we hypothesize that greater levels of generalized media distrust will 1) enhance expressive participation, as a result of induced polarization; 2) reduce political involvement and assembly; and 3) diminish levels of political intervention and collective action against government actions as a result of lower levels of political knowledge. In this context, we understand “generalized media distrust” as “generalized distrust towards news media as an institution in society”, as defined by Prochazka & Schweiger (2018).

Methods

In order to test for the effects of generalized media distrust on different kinds of political participation, we propose three alternative methods, listed below and illustrated on Table 1.

Alternative 1: A longitudinal study. This alternative proposes a longitudinal study using surveys to assess generalized media trust and different kinds of participation periodically over the process of two years. By observing changes in levels of generalized media trust and different kinds of participation, we can better assess the strength of the correlation between these variables. However, this study would still not allow us to form conclusions about causality.

Alternative 2: An experimental focus group study. This alternative proposes a focus group with a randomized sample of the population with the goal of manipulating their generalized media trust levels and then observing the effects of this manipulation on expressive, involved and intervening participation. For a period of three months, the first group would periodically read news reports tagged as biased or factually untrue, in a social media setting where the reports would be displayed alongside posts by friends, memes, and fake news.

Three months after the completion of the treatment, we would test, via survey methods, the frequency of each participant's expressive participation, involved participation and intervening participation efforts. The second group, meanwhile, would periodically receive factually-verified news reports and statistics about media reliability. After the period of three months, this group would too take the participation survey. Finally, the control group would receive no news articles and then take the participation survey. We anticipate that all three groups would be receiving information from a motley of news sources outside the experiment, and our goal is to therefore assess the added effect of each news diet on the participation habits of the participants. We would control for different kinds of news diets of the participants using survey questions aimed at assessing the frequency of interaction with the news and the range of each individual's most-read sources on a scale from moderate to partisan to extreme partisan.

Alternative 3: Using social media interaction to measure participation. In this alternative, participants of a three-month period experiment would keep up with the news using a specific social media site, like Facebook. This experiment, too, would be split into three groups: one more likely to receive biased, unverified and fake news reporting and posts questioning the integrity of the media in general; one more likely to receive solid, verified news reporting and few opinion pieces; and a control group with a mix of both. After the three-month experiment, we would assess all three kinds of participation based on survey methods, but would also assess expressive participation through an analysis of social media postings and engagement. This would allow us to at least have one direct measure of participation.

Prochazka and Schweiger (2018) assessed different measures of generalized media trust, testing for confirmatory factors, and suggest the Kohring and Matthes' (2007) trust in new media scale, which includes a) selectivity of topics discussed in the media; b) selectivity of facts; c) accuracy of depictions; and d) journalistic assessment. Though media trust could technically also be assessed through experimental methods, such as adapted games and online tests, we believe that the survey methods are a more solid measurement of generalized media trust.

Political participation, even in its many forms, is also often assessed through survey data, for several reasons. Experimentally, one might be able to predict an individual's intention to participate, but one's actual frequency of participation can only be measured ex post facto, since not all forms of political participation are necessarily predicted or planned. Additionally, survey methodology allows us to distinguish between different forms of political participation, which is a crucial distinction for the testing of our hypothesis. Thus, the measures of involved participation – defined as “assembly and banding together” by Dahlgren (2013), and intervening participation – collective or individual action aimed to intervene in a specific political topic – are only measured by survey methods. Talò and Mannarini (2014) break political participation into subcategories like activism, civil participation and formal participation, and their Participatory Behaviors Scale (PBS) is thus appropriate for assessing involved participation (which includes activism and civil participation) and intervening participation (assessed by the formal participation indicator in the PBS scale). The measure for expressive participation can be assessed through data analysis of social media postings, comments and messages. This assessment, however, would be constraining without being complemented with survey methods, since looking only at online expressive participation would render incomplete data.

Table 1 below depicts these measurement methods.

Table 1: Measures and methods for three alternatives

Method	Measure of media trust	Measure of expressive participation	Measure of involved participation	Measure of intervening participation
Longitudinal survey	Kohring and Matthes' (2007) trust in new media scale	Survey asking about the weekly frequency of the use of expressive activities, which were indicated on a 7-point interval scale (Borrero et al 2014)	Activism and civil participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)	Formal participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)
Focus group research	Kohring and Matthes' (2007) trust in new media scale	Survey asking about the weekly frequency of the use of expressive activities, which were indicated on a 7-point interval scale (Borrero et al 2014)	Activism and civil participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)	Formal participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)
Cross surveys with instrumental variable	Kohring and Matthes' (2007) trust in new media scale	Data analysis of social media use for political discussion, including an analysis of posts, comments and shared articles survey (Borrero et al 2014)	Activism and civil participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)	Formal participation items from the Participatory Behaviors Scale (Talò and Mannarini 2014)

Conclusion

The study of the effects of generalized media trust on political participation is particularly timely in an era of unprecedented levels of media distrust. With the government and the media as the least trusted institutions around the globe, one would expect interpersonal trust among members of civil society to be higher in comparison. However, when particularized and polarized, interpersonal trust is not necessarily beneficial for democratic participation. This study thus highlights the importance of assessing political participation according to not only activity, but also intent. This working proposal is open to suggestions and comments.

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