

Media Malaise or Mobilization: How Mass Media affect Electoral Participation in Established Democracies

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Abstract

In modern democracies, elections are considered the central mechanism for people to control their elected representatives. They allow voters who are dissatisfied with those in power to periodically punish and replace them. However, this requires that political decision-making is transparent and that alternative party options are actually evident in the electoral contest. Accordingly, in line with mobilization theory, we assume that well-balanced and critical media coverage leads to a higher turnout. So far, only few studies exist which test these assumptions in a large comparative setting. To provide more empirical evidence on the relationship between media coverage and political participation, we combine data about press systems and from newspaper content analyses with opinion surveys and perform multi-level analyses. Contrary to our assumptions, we find that an ideological balance within the press system does not motivate citizens to take part in elections. In addition, newspapers reports about official misconduct tend to keep voters away from the ballot boxes. These findings rather lend support to media malaise theory.

1 Introduction

Elections are still a key feature of modern representative democracies. Regular elections serve to determine the composition of the government and force political representatives to consider the wishes of the citizens in their policy-making (Teorell 2006). This fosters the responsiveness of the political system, but only if those who do express their preferences at the polls are representative for the population at large (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006). Yet, voting is costly, and as turnout statistics show worldwide, participation levels in elections tend to be decreasing since the 1960s (Lijphart 1997).¹ According to Lijphart (1997), low turnout goes at the expense of equal participation. Hence, the fewer people vote in elections, the more certain societal groups are overrepresented in the voting population.

In this contribution, we argue that media can provide useful incentives to vote. Mass media play an increasingly crucial role in contemporary democracies since they are the main source of information for the vast majority of the electorate. Following normative democratic theory, media basically have two functions for democracy in general and for electoral participation in particular. On the one hand, mass media should serve as a forum for the public discourse among all members of the society. On the other hand, they need to guarantee the flow of information between governors and the governed.

The aim of this paper is to test how the performance of these two functions by the press affects the willingness of individuals to choose parties and participate in elections. Our analyses are based on multi-level analyses of a large range of countries. In order to test our assumptions, we rely on various data sources. The individual-level data is taken from large-scale international surveys. The indicators that capture democratic performance of the press focus, on the one hand on information about a country's press system. On the other hand, we work with a new dataset which is based on a comprehensive computer-assisted content analysis.

The paper is structured as follows: chapter 2 and 3 outline the theoretical and empirical literature on the subject and derives our central expectations. Chapter 4 discusses the design of our study as well as the data and methods used. The results of our analyses are presented in chapter 5. Chapter 6 summarizes our findings and concludes.

2 The importance of electoral turnout for democracy

The involvement of the people in shaping political decisions is the key characteristic of democratic regimes. According to the notion which is probably most widespread and which Teorell (2006) calls

¹ This is of course also due to the prevalence of new forms of political participation.

'responsive democracy', participation serves to influence both the composition and the decisions of governments, in order to ensure the equal consideration of all citizens' preferences and needs in the political process of representative democracies (Teorell 2006: 789). From this perspective, elections can be considered the central form of participation in representative democracies. Not only do they directly determine the composition of governing bodies, they are also supposed to affect the policies pursued by political representatives. Thereby, elections are important for the responsiveness, vertical accountability and ultimately the legitimacy of democratic regimes (Anderson 2007; Dahl 1971; Powell 2004; Bühlmann and Kriesi 2007; Bühlmann, Merkel and Wessels 2008). However, elections only contribute to the "chain of responsiveness" (Powell 2004) if 1) voters choose from a range of electoral alternatives those candidates or parties which best endorse their preferences and 2) if voters hold incumbents accountable for their past actions, i.e. if they elect those representatives out of office whose performance has not been satisfying (Powell 2004; Ramsden 1996: 74f.).

Additionally and even more fundamentally, if the interests of all citizens are to be represented in the decision making process, participation needs to be equal. In other words, the preferences and needs of the voting population should be representative of the preferences and needs of the whole electorate (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Teorell 2006; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006). This implies that as many people as possible should actually express their preferences by casting a vote, because – as common sense suggests and as research has shown – the higher turnout levels are, the more equal participation is (Bühlmann and Kriesi 2007; Lijphart 1997; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006). Thus, the more citizens are mobilized to go to the polls, the lower the likelihood that certain social groups are systematically excluded from the political process.

This raises the question of which individual characteristics determine whether citizens take part in elections or not. The literature on this subject is of course abundant. Following Teorell (2006), there are two main causes of participation. First, several resources affect people's capacity to vote. This includes physical capital, such as income, wealth and spare time (Norris 2000), social capital in the form of social networks (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993) and finally human capital, which comprises education as well as "political sophistication" (Luskin 1987). Sophistication requires skills and knowledge, such as for example the citizens' perception of their political comprehension (internal efficacy), their ability to evaluate government performance, or to place parties and themselves onto the left-right scale (Luskin 1987; Bühlmann and Kriesi 2007; Teorell 2006; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006). The second cause of participation is the people's motivation to vote. Important factors to capture motivation are an individual's general interest in politics, media news consumption, party identification, satisfaction with life or the way democracy works or norms, such as a perceived civic voting duty (Norris 2000; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006).

But participation levels do not only differ between individuals, they also vary across the different environments in which individuals live (Blais 2006; Bühlmann 2006). Franklin even states that "turnout varies much more from country to country than it does between different types of individuals" (Franklin 1996: 217f.). According to Lijphart, this suggests "that in order to expand voting in a country with low turnout it is much more promising to improve the institutional context than to raise levels of education and political interest" (Lijphart 1997: 7). This paper focuses on the impact of one specific feature of the institutional context: mass media, and more specifically the press. The next chapter discusses how mass media can influence electoral participation as well as an individual's resources and motivation to vote.

3 The role of the media for participation

Chan emphasizes that a modern democracy is by definition a mediated democracy, with the media serving as a means of expression and as a means of information (Chan 2001: 115). In this quote, the two core normative functions of the media for democracy become obvious. First, media should guarantee a public forum or a "marketplace of ideas" (Napoli 1999) where all social groups can express and exchange their interests and demands (Beierwaltes 2000; Graber 2003; Norris 2000; Rautenfeld 2005; Woods 2007). Second, media should provide all citizens with information about politics, public affairs and the activities of the political elites (Beierwaltes 2000; Graber 2003; Lippman 1923; Norris 2000).

These functions become especially relevant during election campaigns. Because of the progressing dealignment of voters from clear ideological ties since the 1960s, political parties lost their stable constituencies (Dalton 1984; Dalton, Beck and Flanagan 1984). Accordingly, today the communication of political affairs primarily takes place via the mass media (Bennett and Entman 2001; Froehlich 2001: 21; Glynn et al. 1999; McAllister 2002; Ramsden 1996). "The vast majority of an electorate only hears about politics and election campaigns through the media and the content forms the backdrop against which political leaders, institutions, and issues are evaluated" (Vreese and Semetko 2004: 14).

For all these reasons, media² are assumed to be important mobilizing agents who can propel citizens to go to the polls. The central role that media play in electoral contests is largely undebated (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Vreese and Semetko 2004). Vreese and Semetko even argue that "given the centrality of media in campaigns, common sense suggests that the media are bound to have effects on the electorate" (Vreese and Semetko 2004: 14). Yet, despite a large number of

² Especially newspapers and television, which are usually cited as the main sources of information by citizens all over the world (Vreese and Semetko 2004).

studies, the existence and nature of these effects are still not very clear (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002). So far, political science and communication research has struggled to provide solid empirical evidence of the media's impact on electoral participation. The effects found in quantitative studies are often weak or inconclusive on the one hand, or mixed and contradictory on the other hand. There are various methodological reasons for this empirical weakness. But most importantly, there is a fundamental lack of cross-country comparative studies. Most research focuses on the United States and maybe a few additional countries (Gulati, Just and Crigler 2004: 251; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002: 2). However, since media systems and cultures vary greatly across countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004), so might their influence on recipients. Thus, the larger context in which media take place should be taken into account. For this reason, this contribution provides an analysis of media effects across a wide range of countries.

On top of the question whether media influence voters or not, the literature is also very controversial regarding *how* media coverage actually affects voters and especially their propensity to vote. Most commonly, mass media have been accused of not living up to the normative expectations imposed on them. According to "video- or media malaise" theory (Newton 1999; Norris 2000), political news is not only increasingly rare but also focuses more and more on personalization, scandals and sensational events as well as the conflict and competition between political actors instead of substantive political issues (Gerhards 1994; Gulati, Just and Crigler 2004; Gunther and Mughan 2000; Habermas 2006; Imhof 2002; Iyengar 1991; Jarren 1998; Patterson 1998; Rhee 1997). This development, in turn, is supposed to lead to civic disengagement, mistrust and a crisis of political legitimacy (Glynn et al. 1999: 441; Gunther and Mughan 2000: 427; Kleinnijenhuis, Hoof and Oegema 2006; Vreese and Semetko 2004: 16).

Adherents of the mobilization theory, by contrast, rely more often on cross-country comparisons. Pointing to the rising cognitive mobilization of the population (Dalton 1996; Inglehart 1990), they conclude that the amount of substantive news in the media is generally satisfying and does actually foster or at least not inhibit the citizens' participation, knowledge and trust (Graber 2004). Accordingly, Norris (2000) finds that attention to newspapers and TV news has a positive impact on turnout in EU elections. In a similar vein, Newton (1999) lends support to the mobilization theory by showing that reading broadsheet newspapers or watching TV news in the United Kingdom leads to more knowledge, interest and confidence regarding politics. At the same time, paying attention to tabloid newspapers or general television content has almost no effects on either mobilization or media malaise (Newton 1999: 591f.).

In this contribution, we pick up the two central functions of media in a democracy. On the one hand, we argue that media have to guarantee a good balance of different political forces in the

public sphere. On the other hand, they have to inform the citizens about the activities and especially malpractice of political elites. For our comparative study, we generally expect that the better the media perform these functions, the higher is their mobilization potential.

3.1 Mass media as a public forum for diverse opinions

Media are supposed to contribute to a healthy democracy if they provide a public forum where all social groups can articulate and exchange their interests and demands. Voltmer (2000) calls this “opinion diversity”. In electoral contests, this is especially important for parties – incumbent and competitors – who need space and time to make their political positions publicly known (Ferree et al. 2002: 207f.). We argue that the larger the range of ideological positions represented within a media system, the more likely it is that every social and political force finds space to articulate its demands, and thus, the more likely it is that voters find their preferred vote choice.

However, opinion diversity can be reached in two ways (Norris 2000; Voltmer 2000). First, internal opinion diversity requires that a media system exhibits a high share of politically neutral or independent media outlets which are committed to cover the full range of different political opinions. Second, external opinion diversity means that there is an even, unbiased ideological balance of politically aligned media organizations on the aggregate system level.

From a theoretical point of view, some scholars think of external opinion diversity as a threat to the quality of democracy. They prefer internal opinion diversity because it allows individuals to receive a balanced supply of viewpoints by using just one channel of information (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 423). Others acknowledge that biased media organizations in a system of external opinion diversity might provide citizens with helpful guidance for the formation of preferences and also better mobilize them (Norris 2000: 28; Voltmer 2000: 11, 45). Because of this ambiguity, we will consider both forms of opinion diversity:

H1a: The higher the share of politically neutral newspapers, the higher an individual’s propensity to vote.

H1b: The better the balance between the political alignments of newspapers, the higher an individual’s propensity to vote.

3.2 Mass media as public watchdogs

As already mentioned, according to representatives of the media malaise theory, media report too negatively about politics in general, and this is assumed to demobilize voters. However, it actually is the media’s job to take a critical stance towards political elites. As discussed above, one of the media’s normative democratic functions refers to the „duty to inform the public fully about the actions taken by governmental elites and experts” (Champlin and Knoedler 2006: 138). Hence,

media act as guardians, as a fourth power. They constantly monitor the political office holders by making their activities publicly visible (Norris 2000: 28f.). Similarly, Graber (2003: 143) posits that media have to „act as a public watchdog that barks loudly when it encounters misbehavior, corruption, and abuses of power in the halls of government”. From this perspective, media coverage discrediting governing actors is actually desirable and should foster the citizens’ determination to retrospectively hold them accountable and vote corrupt officials out of office. We therefore expect that:

H2: The more often political actors and institutions are associated with malpractice in the news, the higher an individual’s propensity to vote.

4 Data and methods

In this chapter, we discuss the country samples, the measures and datasets used as well as the methods applied.

4.1 Country sample

In order to test the hypotheses discussed in chapter 3, two different samples of countries are used.

H1a and H1b are analyzed on the basis of a sample of 33 countries, which were selected according to data availability.³ All of these countries can be considered established democracies (Bühlmann, Merkel and Wessels 2008). For the analysis of H2 the country sample has to be reduced. This is because content analysis data (see chapter 4.3 below) is only available for 15 countries so far. These are: Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Switzerland, however, is split in two cases, the German and a French speaking part, because the Swiss media system is very much segregated along language borders.

4.2 Main individual-level variables

The main variables of interest on the individual level are the dependent variable, electoral participation, and the independent variables, resources and motivation to vote. These are measured by means of survey data. For the European Union member states in our samples, we use the European Election Study (EES) 2004. Data for all the other countries is taken from the 5th wave of the World Value Survey (WVS, 2004-2008). Because the aim of this paper is to explore the influence of newspaper coverage, we limit all our analyses to those survey respondents who

³ Australia, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

indicated actually reading a newspaper at least once a week. The exact question wordings of all the survey items used and their categories are listed in *table A.2* in the appendix.

4.2.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable intends to measure whether individuals participate in elections or not. To this aim, we use a survey item assessing prospective vote intentions. It asks for the party respondents would vote for if there were elections tomorrow. We coded all individuals opting for a party or to vote blank or null as voters. All individuals answering “I would not vote”, “none”, “refused” (EES only), “no answer” or “do not know” were coded as non-voters.⁴ Respondents not allowed voting and other missings were excluded.

The choice of this dependent variable requires some justification. There are two main advantages. First, analyzing the news coverage just prior to the survey allows us to connect an individual’s resources, motivation and willingness to vote with actual, recent media content.⁵ Second, not restricting our analysis to real election periods might help isolate media effects. Some authors pointed out that testing media effects in election campaigns is difficult because it is very unclear if voters are really influenced by the news reports or the political ads of electoral competitors (Glynn et al. 1999: 439). So by looking at off-election periods – or at least not election periods exclusively – we can lessen the ‘noise’ coming from other campaign elements.

We are of course aware of the problem that participation levels as reported in vote intentions might be highly biased. As is already the case with the vote recall question, social desirability and the greater easiness of simply picking a response category than actually going to the polls could lead to overestimated participation rates. A comparison of actual turnout levels and aggregate participation rates as indicated by the prospective voting question shows considerable deviations from the mean turnout rates between 1995 and 2005. However, these are generally not larger or more frequent than with the vote recall question.

⁴ The last few of these categories could be questioned. However, we argue that if individuals did not know which party to choose or refused an answer they would probably not go to the polls if there really were elections the following day. It is of course possible that those who refused an answer would vote, but simply were reluctant to give away their vote choice. However, comparing this category with the question on general party preference in the WVS shows that only about half of the individuals giving no answer regarding their prospective participation also refused to indicate a general party preference. Moreover, about 80% of the respondents refusing an answer to the dependent variable in the WVS and EES had no problem indicating their position on the left-right scale. This suggests that not responding to the prospective vote questions is rather related to cluelessness than discomfort with naming his or her preferred party.

⁵ Of course, using comparative post-election surveys such as provided by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) would have been a good option. However, CSES surveys are not yet available as of 2004, the start year of our analysis, for all the countries in our samples.

4.2.2 Independent variables

The independent variables on the individual level measure the citizens' resources and motivation to vote. The usual factors in this regard have already been discussed in chapter 3 above. However, the inclusion of all these variables into the analyses is not possible due to limited availability of comparable survey items across the two different surveys and for all countries. As for individual resources, physical capital is measured by income. Human capital consists of education and two proxy indicators capturing political sophistication: one is the respondents' ability to place themselves onto the left-right scale, the other their ability to name the most important problem or aim of their country. Finally, the only comparable social capital factors are whether an individual is member in a trade union (dummy) and how often he or she attends religious services.

The most important indicator to account for individuals' motivation to vote is their level of general political interest. Second, we include an individual's frequency of watching or listening to TV and radio news. Finally, we try to capture the respondents' satisfaction with the way democracy works and with the performance of their governments by two proxy variables asking for trust or confidence in the government and in the parliament.

4.3 Media data

The media variables are the main factors of interest on the contextual level. As discussed in chapter 3 we will test both the effects of newspapers' performance with regard to opinion diversity (H1a and H1b) and their watchdog role (H2) on the citizens' propensity to vote.

4.3.1 H1a and H1b

To assess the political orientations of newspapers, Schmitt-Beck (2003, 2004) used the average political leanings of different media sources as rated by survey respondents and tested how they affected the vote choices of their respective recipients. However, since we do not have data on the perceived political alignments of media outlets in any of the two surveys, we have chosen a different procedure to measure the ideological bias in press systems. Closely based on Voltmer (2000), we have created two indicators. The first reflects the aggregate ideological position of a country's press system and thus the degree of external opinion diversity. It serves as the independent variable for H1b and is constructed by the weighted means of the political affiliations of the most important newspapers in a country.⁶

⁶ The "Political Handbook of the World 2005-2006" (PHW; Banks, Muller and Overstreet 2005) provided the list of the most important regional and national newspapers for every country, including their circulation and ideological leaning as rated by experts. On the basis of the indicated political affiliations, each newspaper was assigned a Manifesto party family code between 1 and 6. 1 to 3 represent the left side of the political spectrum, 4 to 6 the right side. Newspapers listed as "independent" were considered neutral and therefore received a value of 3.5. Additional sources were used to crosscheck the political ratings in the PHW (Hans-Bredow-Institut (2002); Kelly, Mazzoleni and McQuail (2004); Mondo Times (<http://www.mondotimes.com/>); Østergaard (1992); Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>);

The second indicator, by contrast, reflects internal opinion diversity and will be used as independent variable for H1a. It corresponds to the circulation of neutral or politically independent newspapers relative to country's total newspaper circulation. Or in other words, the share of newspapers with the code 3.5, weighted by circulation and frequency of publication.

4.3.2 H2

Data for the independent variables in H2 is taken from a large computer-assisted content analysis of the largest newspaper in every country in the reduced sample. More specifically, the paid daily newspaper with the highest circulation for which electronically archived copies are available in the two most comprehensive newspaper databases (LexisNexis and Factiva) was studied. The time frames for the content analyses were the six months preceding the survey in each country. The exact time frames and newspapers chosen for each of the 15 countries can be found in *table A.1* in the appendix. The sampling of articles within these periods of analysis followed an „artificial week” approach (Bauer 2000). For every country and media outlet, the Monday of the first week, the Tuesday of the second week, the Wednesday of the third week and so on was selected. Saturdays and Sundays were excluded, and holidays were replaced by the closest publication day. On the days chosen, all articles contained in a newspaper were sampled.

The final indicators are based on the number of appearances of entities in the news media coverage. As entities we denote here the concepts we wanted to extract from the texts, i.e. political actors, political institutions or the mentioning of corruption and similar forms of misconducts in office. To perform a comprehensive search for our entities, we prepared an extensive ontology of political parties⁷, politicians, and keywords indicating political institutions (the three constitutional powers and the public administration) as well as corruption and the like. For every party, we included the abbreviation, the full party name, and deviating names of specific party sections (e.g. regionally different names). To ensure comparability among countries, the following politicians were considered: the head of state, the head of government, ministers, members of parliaments (lower chamber) and party presidents.⁸

Worldpress.org (<http://www.worldpress.org/>). Each newspaper code was then multiplied by the respective newspaper's circulation so that smaller newspapers receive less weight (non-dailies' circulation was adjusted accordingly). The weighted codes were averaged per country and year, and finally their deviance from the neutral value 3.5 was calculated.

⁷ To assess the relevant parties during the observation period, we relied on data provided by the Social Science Research Centre in Berlin and used all parties which gained at least 1% of all votes in the previous election.

⁸ The official online services of the respective countries' governments, parliaments and parties as well as Wikipedia provided all information on the relevant politicians.

The keywords which match general mentions of political institutions and corruption, finally, were obtained in multiple steps. Initially, we compiled a list of keywords from our general knowledge.⁹ This original list was extended by synonyms using WordNet (Fellbaum 1998)¹⁰ and translated into the seven languages in our analyses with the help of various online translation tools.¹¹ Further, we added country-specific keywords, e.g. the “Bundestag” in Germany or the “House of Commons” in the Britain. In a final step, all keywords were stemmed.¹²

When performing a list-based automatic annotation of texts, above all the problem of false positives appears, i.e. entities found that do not match the concept supposed to be found.¹³ To resolve such aliases and ambiguities, we additionally implemented heuristic rules. An example of an implemented rule is that a politician is only identified if both first name and last name are found within the same sentence, or if he or she has already been mentioned within the article.

Table A.3 in the appendix shows the key numbers of our keyword search as well as the results of reliability assessments. Coding errors most likely occur in outlier cases. We therefore assessed internal reliability for Mexico, where the highest share of relevant articles was obtained, and the German speaking part of Switzerland, which yielded the lowest share of relevant articles. While the recall test for the selection of relevant articles and the precision of the entity recognition in Switzerland is very satisfying, we had some difficulties to recognize entities in Mexico.¹⁴ The external reliability test, however, the comparison of the shares of parties in the content analysis with their effective electoral strengths, clearly shows that we measure the distribution with high accuracy, even in Mexico.

For the purpose of this paper, four indicators were constructed from the content analyses data to analyze H2. They measure how many articles mention representatives of the government, the parliament or political parties in general along with the keywords capturing corruption and other

⁹ Examples for such words are “bureaucracy” and “government” for political institutions and “evasion” or “bribe” for corruption.

¹⁰ WordNet is a large lexical database of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, that are grouped into sets of synonyms. These sets are interlinked by means of conceptual-semantic and lexical relations. The result is a network of meaningfully related words, which can be searched to find semantic synonyms. (Fellbaum 1998).

¹¹ We employed Leo (<http://dict.leo.org>; English, German, French, and Italian), Babelfish (<http://de.babelfish.yahoo.com/>; all languages) and the Google translator (<http://translate.google.ch/>; all languages). Since these services often perform very badly, we crosschecked all results using at least two different translation tools, in order to minimize the probability of translation errors.

¹² Stemming is a common computational linguistic procedure to extract word stems. Stemmed keywords have the advantage that they find similar words and the various flexions of the same word. The stem “legisl”, for instance, matches “legislative”, “legislating”, “legislator”, “legislature”, as well as the respective plural forms. The snowball project provides acceptable stemmers for all the seven languages (see <http://snowball.tartarus.org/>).

¹³ A good example is the widespread English name “Brown”. On the one hand, such a frequent name can refer to many other persons than the targeted Mr. or Ms. “Brown”. On the other hand, “brown” is also an adjective indicating a color.

¹⁴ These problems were mainly due to the high complexity of Mexican names. For example, the difference between José Julio Gonzalez Garza and José Gonzalez Morfin is very subtle and difficult to make for automated entity recognition, because both politicians have José as main first name and Gonzales as main last name.

forms of misconduct in the same paragraph, compared to all articles about these actors and institutions.

4.4 Control variables

Finally, some more variables are needed to control for well-known effects in participation research, both on the individual and the contextual or country level. On the individual level, we control for age and gender. Research has often found that people tend to participate more, the older they are (Bühlmann 2006: 59; Norris 2000: 262; Teorell, Sum and Tobiasen 2006: 393). As for gender, many studies have shown that men tend to vote more often than women (Bühlmann 2006: 60; Norris 2002: 139).

Besides mass media, many institutional and other country-specific characteristics have been suggested as determinants of electoral turnout in the participation literature (Blais 2006; Bühlmann 2006; Lijphart 1997).¹⁵ The most decisive institutional determinant according to some authors is the existence of compulsory voting within a country (Lijphart 1997: 8; Norris 2000: 263). We only count compulsory voting on the national level and if enforced in practice, but regardless of the types of sanctions imposed.¹⁶ Second, we include the number of parties in the lower legislative chamber (Henisz 2006). This is supposed to affect turnout rates, even though the direction of the influence is not clear. While a high number of parties offers voters many choices to find the best representatives for their preferences, it also increases the likelihood of government coalitions and makes finding the right choice more complicated and costly (Blais 2006: 118; Bühlmann 2006: 149f.). Finally, because of our special choice of dependent variable, we control for the approximate number of days between the survey and a national, parliamentary election. We use the closer of either the last or the next general elections.

4.5 Multi-level method

The hypotheses will be tested by means of multilevel analysis.¹⁷ This method serves to study a phenomenon on one level of analysis by taking into account explanatory factors on a higher level of analysis (Bühlmann 2006; Steenbergen and Jones 2002). For our purpose, we can explain individuals' willingness to participate by their personal characteristics as well as by certain attributes of the contexts - in our case countries - they live in. Additionally, it is possible to test so-called "cross-level interactions" in the multilevel framework (Bühlmann 2006: 273). In other words, it can be analyzed how the relationship between and independent and the dependent variable on the

¹⁵ Their values can be found in *table A.3* in the appendix.

¹⁶ Source: International IDEA (http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm) (05.08.2009).

¹⁷ We use MLwiN software.

individual level vary across contexts, i.e. according to contextual factors. For this reason, we also test whether a good balance of diverse political forces and a high amount of news associating governmental actors with malpractice lower the impact of personal resources and motivation on voter mobilization.

5 Results

We now turn to the results of our analyses. Chapter 5.1 discusses the balance of the press system on individual willingness to vote, following the expectations outlined in H1a and H1b. Chapter 5.2 then turns to the effects of the amount of news reports about misconduct by different political actors and institutions on voting propensities in order to test H2. It is important to note that our results must be considered preliminary and tentative. To really draw solid conclusions further and more detailed examinations as well as robustness checks are needed.

5.1 The impact of opinion diversity on the likelihood of voting (H1a and H1b)

In order to analyze H1a and H1b, we use the larger sample of 33 countries and rely on media variables which capture an important characteristic of a country's press system: its degree of ideological pluralism or neutrality. *Table 1* shows the respective results of a series of multi-level regression models. They follow a stepwise procedure. In a first step, an empty model, i.e. a model not containing any explanatory variables, is estimated in order to test whether the dependent variable varies significantly across contexts. This indicates whether a multi-level model is appropriate. Second, the effects of the individual level variables are estimated in model 2. Finally, the contextual variables are introduced in the models 3 to 6.

Table 1: Multi-level models predicting willingness to vote by ideological bias of press system

| | Empty Model | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| FIXED EFFECTS | | | | | |
| Constant | 1.57*** (.19) | -.86*** (.29) | -1.39*** (.47) | -1.71*** (.51) | -2.13*** (.56) |
| Individual Level | | | | | |
| Income | - | .17** (.07) | .17** (.07) | .17** (.07) | .17** (.07) |
| Education | - | -.50 (.46) | -.50 (.47) | -.51 (.47) | -.50 (.47) |
| Ability naming most important problem | - | .09* (.06) | .09* (.06) | .09* (.06) | .09* (.06) |
| Ability of left-right self-placement | - | .92*** (.08) | .93*** (.08) | .93*** (.08) | .94*** (.08) |
| Union membership | - | .14** (.06) | .14** (.06) | .14** (.06) | .14** (.06) |
| Frequency of church-going | - | .26*** (.08) | .26*** (.08) | .26*** (.08) | .26*** (.09) |
| Political interest | - | 1.39*** (.12) | 1.40*** (.12) | 1.40*** (.12) | 1.42*** (.13) |
| Watching TV news | - | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) |
| Trust in government | - | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) | .27** (.11) |
| Trust in parliament | - | .77*** (.19) | .78*** (.20) | .77*** (.20) | .78*** (.20) |
| Age | - | .54*** (.18) | .54*** (.19) | .54*** (.19) | .55*** (.19) |
| Gender (male) | - | .12** (.05) | .12** (.05) | .12** (.05) | .12** (.05) |
| Contextual Level | | | | | |
| % neutral newspapers | - | - | .62 (.84) | .59 (.96) | .20 (.83) |
| Degree of ideological press bias | - | - | .97 (.89) | - | - |
| Right press bias (dummy) | - | - | - | .86*** (.32) | .85*** (.32) |
| Compulsory voting | - | - | - | - | .36 (.49) |
| Number of parties | - | - | - | - | 1.36 (1.70) |
| Days to/since election | - | - | - | - | .64 (.75) |
| RANDOM EFFECTS | | | | | |
| Individual-Level (S^2) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) |
| Contextual Level (S^2_{m0}) | 1.11*** (.37) | 1.15*** (.38) | 1.22*** (.39) | 1.08*** (.30) | 1.05*** (.33) |
| MODEL PROPERTIES | | | | | |
| Number of Cases (Countries) | 22'621 (33) | 22'621 (33) | 22'621 (33) | 22'621 (33) | 22'621 (33) |
| Wald-Test (joint χ^2); (degrees of freedom) | 90.27 (1) | 568.38 (13) | 637.21 (15) | 606.21 (15) | 697.06 |

Notes: Not standardized Logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets. Estimation procedure: RIGLS, 2nd order PQL. All variables rescaled to range from 0 to 1, so that coefficients are comparable and indicate the change associated with moving from the lowest to the highest value. Cases are weighted by socio-demographic characteristics and sample size and only include newspaper readers. *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$.

The empty model shows that the contextual variance of the intercept associated with the dependent variable is highly significant. This means that individual voting propensity varies across countries. The context is therefore important and estimating a multi-level model is justified. Moving to model 2, we observe that most of the individual determinants of turnout are significant and have the expected effects. The level of individual political interest seems to have by far the largest influence, followed by the respondents' ability to place them onto the left-right axis. Furthermore, the positive effects of institutional trust are noteworthy. Apparently, institutional trust serves as a measure for external efficacy, strengthening the individuals' belief that their vote is worthwhile. Following news on television or radio also has a positive effect on voting propensity, even though we only look at regular newspaper readers. A little surprising is the insignificant coefficient for education. This

might be due to the somewhat unconventional measurement of this variable, which equals the age when respondents completed their full-time education. Furthermore, the effect of education is covered up by the other explanatory variables, mainly political interest and the ability of ideological self-placement.

All these individual-level effects remain stable in model 3, which includes the main contextual variables of interest. Turning to the latter, the first coefficient shows that contrary to H1a, a higher share of neutral newspapers within a country does not lead to a higher voting probability. Similarly, the degree of ideological bias within a press system does not have the negative impact expected in H1b. However, this variable simply measures how far a press system departs from complete political balance. It does not take into account towards which side of the political spectrum the press system is biased. Thus, we also tested whether the direction of the ideological bias matters, by recoding the original indicator into a dummy variable. As model 4 shows, this variable has a strong significant and positive influence on individual voting propensity. It indicates that the likelihood of voting is higher when, on the average, the press leans to the right side compared to when it leans to the left side.¹⁸ The effect is robust even when controlling for the three control variables on the contextual level (model 5). This result is quite puzzling and requires further examination. We will thus return to this later on. As for the three control variables, none of them has significant coefficients.

Additionally, we are interested whether media intervene in relationships between individual resources or motivation and the likelihood of voting. Since only the press bias dummy variable turned out to be significant, we only tested cross-level interactions for model 5 in *table 1*.

Table 2: Cross-level interaction effects of right press bias

| Individual-level effect | Contextual variance | Cross-level interaction ^{a)} |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Income | - | |
| Education ^{b)} | 4.34* (2.42) | -1.25 (1.28) |
| Ability naming most important problem | .01 (.02) | |
| Ability of left-right self-placement | .10 (.07) | |
| Union membership | .02 (.03) | |
| Frequency of church-going | .04 (.05) | |
| Political interest | .24** (.10) | -.558** (.23) |
| Watching TV news ^{b)} | .03 (.08) | |
| Trust in government | .15* (.09) | -.02 (.21) |
| Trust in parliament | .72*** (.27) | -.02 (.30) |

Notes: Standard errors in brackets. a) Not standardized Logit coefficients; b) Figures based on model 4. Estimation procedure: RIGLS, 2nd order PQL. Cases are weighted by socio-demographic characteristics and sample size and only include newspaper readers. *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$.

¹⁸ Because of potential multicollinearity with the degree of ideological bias, the impact of this variable is estimated in a separate model.

Table 2 shows if the slopes of the individual-level effects significantly vary between the different countries (column 2) and if these variances can be accounted for by the contextual variable measuring whether there is a right press bias or not (column 3). The rest of the coefficients in model 5 are omitted here because they do not really change when the cross-level interactions are included. Apparently, only four of the individual-level effects vary across contexts.¹⁹ Moreover, only the variation in the impact of political interest can be explained by the contextual variable. Accordingly, in a country with an average right press bias the influence of political interest on the likelihood of voting is much lower than in left party systems.²⁰ This suggests that especially those groups of people who rather tend to abstain from going to the polls rely on the cues that they receive from a right media environment. The reason for this result might be that the respective low interested individuals who are affected by the direction of the press system are supporters of a specific political camp. In order to gain more insight into this puzzle, we thus also estimated to influence of all the variables used in *table 1* on vote intentions for left and right parties respectively.²¹ The results can be found in *table 3*.

For both left and right vote intention we estimated an empty model, a model with only the individual-level variables and finally, a model adding the contextual media variables. The contextual control variables were not included because they do not necessarily make sense for vote choices and because they were not significant in the previous models. First of all, the empty models show that the dependent variables vary significantly across the countries, even though only weakly so in the case of right vote intentions. Second, about half of the individual explanatory variables are significant in the models 2, although not necessarily the same. Trust in the parliament makes voting for a left party more probable, while age has a significant effect on right vote intentions. Furthermore, the individual coefficients often have different directions, which is actually very plausible. It is for example no surprise that union membership reduces the likelihood of voting for a right party and has the opposite impact for left vote intentions.

¹⁹ The contextual variance of income could not be estimated and produced an error message by the software. The estimation of the contextual variances of education and TV watching was only possible in the framework of model 4.

²⁰ This might also explain the interaction between media bias and newspaper exposure just discussed above, since newspaper readers can be expected to belong to the group of highly interested citizens.

²¹ The operationalization is described in the appendix. There was no information on specific party preferences in South Korea. This country was therefore excluded from the analyses in table 3. In order to guarantee comparability, we also performed the analyses in table 1 without the cases from South Korea. The results do not change.

Table 3: Multi-level models predicting left and right vote intention

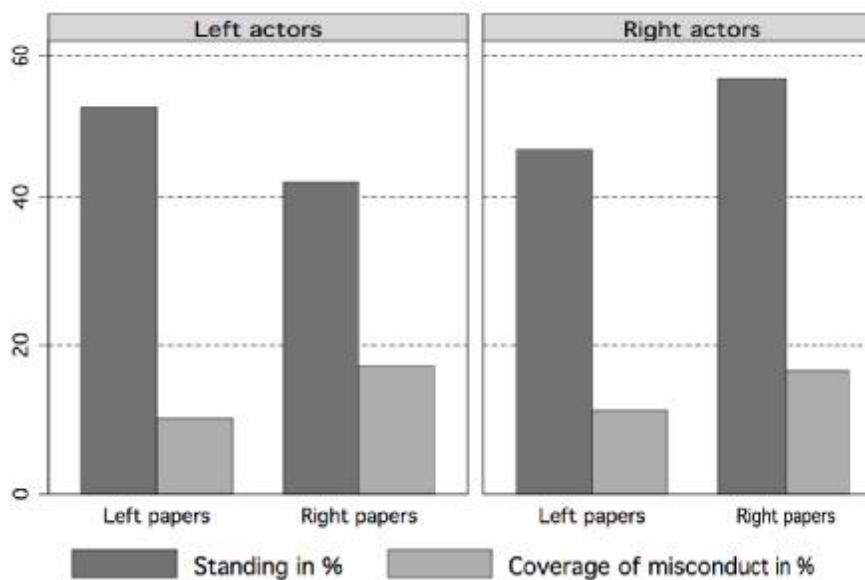
| | <i>Left vote intention</i> | | | <i>Right vote intention</i> | | |
|---|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Empty Model | Model 1 | Model 2 | Empty Model | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| FIXED EFFECTS | | | | | | |
| Constant | -0.21* (.12) | -1.14*** (.31) | -1.47*** (.31) | -.98*** (.13) | -2.28*** (.28) | -2.14*** (.39) |
| <i>Individual Level</i> | | | | | | |
| Income | - | -.44*** (.09) | -.43*** (.09) | - | .60*** (.09) | .60*** (.09) |
| Education | - | -.00 (.43) | -.01 (.43) | - | -.55 (.40) | -.55 (.40) |
| Ability naming most important problem | - | .17*** (.05) | .17*** (.05) | - | -.10 (.07) | -.10 (.07) |
| Ability of left-right self-placement | - | .60*** (.11) | .60*** (.11) | - | .43*** (.09) | .44*** (.09) |
| Union membership | - | .48*** (.07) | .48*** (.07) | - | -.42*** (.09) | -.43*** (.09) |
| Frequency of church-going | - | -.55*** (.12) | -.55*** (.12) | - | .82*** (.12) | .83*** (.12) |
| Political interest | - | .65*** (.05) | .65*** (.05) | - | .29*** (.10) | .30*** (.10) |
| Watching TV news | - | .01 (.12) | .01 (.12) | - | .21 (.13) | .21 (.13) |
| Trust in government | - | -.20 (.38) | -.20 (.38) | - | .49 (.42) | .49 (.42) |
| Trust in parliament | - | .48** (.19) | .48** (.19) | - | .06 (.22) | .06 (.22) |
| Age | - | .01 (.19) | -.00 (.19) | - | .39** (.18) | .39** (.18) |
| Gender (male) | - | -.10** (.05) | -.10** (.05) | - | .15*** (.05) | .15*** (.05) |
| <i>Contextual Level</i> | | | | | | |
| % neutral newspapers | - | - | -.25 (.43) | - | - | .44 (.75) |
| Right press bias (dummy) | - | - | .59*** (.17) | - | - | -.45** (.20) |
| RANDOM EFFECTS | | | | | | |
| Individual-Level (S^2) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) |
| Contextual Level (S^2_{m0}) | .33*** (.09) | .33*** (.09) | .27*** (.07) | .47* (.26) | .61* (.33) | .59** (.28) |
| MODEL PROPERTIES | | | | | | |
| Number of Cases (Countries) | 21'756 (32) | 21'756 (32) | 21'756 (32) | 21'756 (32) | 21'756 (32) | 21'756 (32) |
| Wald-Test (joint χ^2); (degrees of freedom) | 10.39 (1) | 309.38 (13) | 637.82 (15) | 35.80 (1) | 261.39 (13) | 286.93 (15) |

Notes: Not standardized Logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets. Estimation procedure: RIGLS, 2nd order PQL. All variables rescaled to range from 0 to 1, so that coefficients are comparable and indicate the change associated with moving from the lowest to the highest value. Cases are weighted by socio-demographic characteristics and sample size and only include newspaper readers. *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$.

Turning to the contextual model, a very interesting result can be observed, which seems to solve the puzzle found in the previous analyses. It indicates that citizens living in a country with a right press system have a higher probability of voting for a left party than citizens living in a country with a left press system. This corresponds to the effect found for willingness to vote in general. However, looking at right vote intentions, the impact of a right press bias is reversed. This was not visible in the overall voting analysis, maybe because left supporters are overrepresented in the survey. But the finding of opposing effects is quite plausible even though it is not in line with H1b at all. Apparently, an ideologically biased press system mobilizes voters from the opposing political camp.

Our content analysis data provide further insights why this might be the case. *Figure 1* shows that newspapers actually favor actors from their own ideological camp in terms of standing. More specifically, right actors have a clear advantage in terms of media coverage in right newspapers, whereas left actors have a better stance in left newspapers. This suggests that a biased press system leads to a prevalence of the corresponding actors, but this astonishingly does not translate into increasing participation of the voters of the same camp.

Figure 1: Standing and coverage of misconduct of political actors: frequencies in %



The coverage of misconduct, on the other hand, has no influence on the way newspapers report about the different ideological camps.²² To assess the coverage of misconduct, we look at how often political actors or institutions are associated with words that point to misconduct, such as corruption, bribing or scandals. A more critical coverage of the opposite side can thus be excluded as explanatory factor, for the result that biased media systems mobilize the voters with the opposite ideological orientation. In the next section, however, we will show that coverage of misconduct effects participation behavior in a general way beyond ideological differences.

5.2 The impact of the media's watchdog role on the likelihood of voting (H2)

Since we rely on data from the content analysis to test H2, the smaller sample of 16 cases on the contextual level is used as of now. This of course means that the results obtained in multi-level analyses have to be interpreted very cautiously. *Table 4* presents our results concerning the impact

²² The finding that right newspapers are „brisker“ is due to the fact that we have more tabloids in the right media sample. The non-effect on the coverage of the different ideological camps, however, remains if we control for the newspaper type in our sample.

of media acting as watchdogs on voting behavior. Because of the low number of cases on the contextual level we only include one contextual variable per model in the models 3 to 5.²³

Table 4: Multi-level models predicting willingness to vote by coverage of misconduct

| | Empty Model | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
|---|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| FIXED EFFECTS | | | | | | |
| Constant | 1.86*** (.22) | -1.16*** (.36) | -.87** (.43) | -.88*** (.43) | -.92*** (.41) | -.91*** (.44) |
| Individual Level | | | | | | |
| Income | - | .09 (.11) | .08 (.11) | .08 (.11) | .08 (.11) | .08 (.11) |
| Education | - | .39 (.51) | .34 (.51) | .34 (.51) | .35 (.51) | .35 (.51) |
| Ability naming most important problem | - | .19** (.08) | .19** (.07) | .19** (.07) | .19** (.07) | .19** (.07) |
| Ability of left-right self-placement | - | .98*** (.14) | .99*** (.14) | .99*** (.14) | .99*** (.14) | .99*** (.14) |
| Union membership | - | .13* (.07) | .13* (.07) | .13* (.07) | .13* (.07) | .13* (.07) |
| Frequency of church-going | - | .20** (.08) | .20** (.08) | .20** (.08) | .20** (.08) | .20** (.08) |
| Political interest | - | 1.35*** (.22) | 1.35*** (.22) | 1.35*** (.22) | 1.35*** (.22) | 1.35*** (.22) |
| Watching TV news | - | .46*** (.14) | .46*** (.14) | .46*** (.14) | .46*** (.14) | .46*** (.14) |
| Trust in government | - | .12 (.21) | .12 (.21) | .12 (.21) | .12 (.21) | .12 (.21) |
| Trust in parliament | - | .74** (.38) | .75** (.38) | .75** (.38) | .75** (.38) | .74** (.38) |
| Age | - | .57*** (.21) | .57*** (.21) | .57*** (.21) | .57*** (.21) | .57*** (.21) |
| Gender (male) | - | .12* (.07) | .12* (.07) | .12* (.07) | .12* (.07) | .12* (.07) |
| Contextual Level | | | | | | |
| Misconduct executive | - | | -.98* (.56) | - | - | - |
| Misconduct head of state/government | - | | - | -.92* (.48) | - | - |
| Misconduct parliament | - | | - | - | -.79* (.44) | |
| Misconduct parties | - | | - | - | - | -.77* (.45) |
| RANDOM EFFECTS | | | | | | |
| Individual-Level (S^2) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) |
| Contextual Level (S^2_{m0}) | .77* (.45) | .79* (.43) | .74** (.37) | .74* (.38) | .75* (.39) | .76* (.41) |
| MODEL PROPERTIES | | | | | | |
| Number of Cases (Countries) | 11'802 (16) | 11'802 (16) | 11'802 (16) | 11'802 (16) | 11'802 (16) | 11'802 (16) |
| Wald-Test (joint χ^2); (degrees of freedom) | 72.58 (1) | 964.59 (13) | 1'426.28 (14) | 1'885.39 (14) | 3'020.78 (14) | 2'634.43 (14) |

Notes: Not standardized Logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets. Estimation procedure: RIGLS, 2nd order PQL. All variables rescaled to range from 0 to 1, so that coefficients are comparable and indicate the change associated with moving from the lowest to the highest value. Cases are weighted by socio-demographic characteristics and sample size and only include newspaper readers. *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$.

The empty model again confirms our assumption that voting probabilities vary across contexts. Furthermore, the effects of the individual determinants (model 2) are very similar to those estimated for the larger country sample in *table 1*. These individual effects remain robust throughout the contextual models 3 to 5.

²³ We do not report the effects of the contextual control variables on voting probabilities in table 4 because they are not really of interest here. However, we did estimate their impact and found that in the reduced country sample compulsory voting as well as the closeness to elections now have positive effects on voting propensity, while the number of parties reduces the likelihood of voting.

Looking at the contextual effects, we observe that all of the four coefficients have weakly significant negative effects. These findings are quite remarkable, and they suggest that citizens are actually put off by media coverage accusing political office-holders of malpractice. The more frequently media portray political elites critically, the lower is an individual's propensity to vote. However, the results also seem to indicate that the degree of critical media reports only varies across newspapers but not across different types of institutions within a newspaper. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the effects for the executive and the head of state or of government²⁴ respectively are the strongest. The government generally is most exposed and watched by the media and the public alike.

To sum it up, our results do not support H2 but rather corroborate the media malaise theory. By reporting about the actions of political elites in a critical way, media rather drive people away from the polls than helping them to make informed choices and hold the culprits accountable. In addition to the simple multi-level models, we analyzed whether there are cross-level interaction effects of critical media coverage of the different types of actors or institutions on the relationships between the individual variables. In *table 5* we only list those contextual variances, which turned out to be significant. The pattern is the same for every of the four independent contextual variables which again points to the fact that single newspapers report about official misconduct by different actors and institutions to similar degrees.

Table 5: Cross-level interaction effects of critical media coverage

| Individual-level effect | Contextual variance | Cross-level interaction ^{a)} |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Political interest by misconduct executive | .31** (.15) | -.48 (.69) |
| Political interest by misconduct head of state/government | .32** (.15) | -.60 (.70) |
| Political interest by misconduct parliament | .32** (.15) | -.59 (.64) |
| Political interest by misconduct parties | .32** (.15) | -.84 (.76) |
| Trust in government by misconduct executive | .36** (.15) | .21 (.70) |
| Trust in government by misconduct head of state/government | .34** (.14) | -.05 (.71) |
| Trust in government by misconduct parliament | .35** (.15) | .13 (.64) |
| Trust in government by misconduct parties | .34** (.14) | .09 (.72) |
| Trust in parliament by misconduct executive | .97* (.51) | 1.34** (.53) |
| Trust in parliament by misconduct head of state/government | 1.01* (.52) | .86* (.51) |
| Trust in parliament by misconduct parliament | 1.00* (.52) | 1.24** (.55) |
| Trust in parliament by misconduct parties | 1.03* (.53) | 1.04** (.43) |

Notes: Standard errors in brackets. a) Not standardized Logit coefficients; Estimation procedure: RIGLS, 2nd order PQL. Cases are weighted by socio-demographic characteristics and sample size and only include newspaper readers. *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.10$.

Table 5 shows that in every of the models 3 to 6 (*table 4*) only the effects of political interest, trust in the government and trust in the parliament vary across the countries (column 2). But looking at the cross-level interaction terms, only the effect of trust in the parliament on the probability of

²⁴ We focused on the most powerful office in each country. This for example applies to the Chancellor in Germany, the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom and the President in Mexico.

voting was found to vary in terms of how often political actors and institutions are being scandalized by the media. Quite plausibly, the more political elites are associated with malpractice in the media, the higher the likelihood of voting for those who trust the parliament compared to those who do not. This interaction effect is actually strongest for compromising media reports about the executive and about the parliament.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, we set out to explore how press coverage affects electoral participation. More specifically, we were interested in the performance of the newspapers with regard to the two normative functions that media are supposed to fulfill in a democracy and how this relates to individuals' likelihood of voting in elections.

First, we argued that media should provide a diverse public forum which gives space to all political forces in a society. We assessed this by the average political direction of a press system and expected a positive impact of a well-balanced press and individual voting propensities. However, this assumption was not confirmed by our data. Instead, we found that if a press system leans towards a specific ideological direction this mobilizes the supporters of the opposing political camp. Data from the content analysis showed that newspapers tend to report more about those actors which are in line with their political orientation. This might suggest that – because they perceive themselves to be on the losing side – left voters feel a stronger need to participate in elections when they live under a right press system which gives right parties more standing in the public sphere, and vice versa. In a similar vein, the voters of the political camp which profits from the biased media system may lack a strong incentive to support their camp if they perceive to be in the majority anyway. These, however, are only speculations.

Second, we stated that media serve as a public watchdog which seeks “to expose official corruption, corporate scandals, and government failures” (Norris 2000: 28f.). We assumed that the better the press performs this role, and thus the more often political actors and/or institutions are associated with malpractice in the news, the higher is the citizens' desire to vote in order to throw the rascals out of office. Again, this expectation did not hold in our analyses. Quite on the contrary, the higher the share of critical media coverage, the lower was individual likelihood of voting, regardless of which actor or institution was the subject of scrutiny. These rather uniform effects indicate that the newspapers we analyzed do not distinguish between different types of actors. For example, if the government is often scandalized in a newspaper, so is the parliament.

In sum, none of our results support the hypotheses formulated in chapter 3. This leads to the general conclusion that the normative expectations formulated by democracy theory do not really hold in

reality and that the optimistic outlook of mobilization theory can not be upheld in our case. By contrast, our results lend support to the media malaise theory, at least with regard to the second hypothesis. Obviously, it is not enough to only look at the relationship between media exposure and voting behavior as most mobilization theorists do. In fact, if one looks more closely at the media content, the story is not so simple.

However, in concluding we also have to note that we have only provided tentative results in this contribution. This paper can be considered a first attempt to gain more insight into the impact of media coverage on voters in various countries and to explore the data generated by a large-scale content analysis. Accordingly, we are aware of the limitations of our analyses. First and as already discussed, our dependent variable is not ideal for really capturing the people's participation levels and choices. Second, estimating multi-level regression models with only 16 cases on the contextual level is not sufficient to establish robust results. Third, much more detailed analyses are needed to uncover the diverse and complex effects that media coverage seems to have. Finally and most importantly, we have only studied one newspaper per country so far. Even though we tried to choose the largest newspaper, this does not allow drawing general conclusions about the impact of mass media in a country.

For this reason, we intend to extend the content analysis to include more countries and especially more newspapers for every country. The first analyses with our new dataset provided in this paper confirmed our conviction that the data generated by computer-assisted content analysis has a lot of potential and that this method is therefore worth pursuing in the future.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Country sample 2 including data sources and newspaper characteristics

| Country | Year | time period | Newspaper | Rank ^{a)} | Ideological affiliation | Type |
|----------------------|------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| Australia | 2005 | May - Oct. 05 | Herald-Sun | 1 | right | Tabloid |
| Austria | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Die Presse | 6 | right | Quality |
| Canada | 2006 | Oct. 05 - March 06 | Toronto Star | 1 | left | Quality |
| France | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Ouest-France | 1 | right | Tabloid |
| Germany | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Süddeutsche Zeitung | 4 | left | Quality |
| Ireland | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Irish Independent | 1 | right | Quality |
| Italy | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Corriere della Sera | 1 | right | Quality |
| Mexico | 2005 | June - Nov. 05 | Reforma | 6 | right | Quality |
| Netherlands | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | De Telegraaf | 1 | right | Tabloid |
| New Zealand | 2004 | July - Dec. 04 | New Zealand Herald | 1 | right | Quality |
| Spain | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | El País | 1 | left | Quality |
| Sweden | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | Svenska Dagbladet | 5 | right | Quality |
| Switzerland (German) | 2007 | Jan. - June 07 | Blick | 1 | left | Tabloid |
| Switzerland (French) | 2007 | Jan. - June 07 | 24 Heures | 1 | right | Tabloid |
| United Kingdom | 2004 | Jan. - June 04 | The Sun | 1 | right | Tabloid |
| United States | 2006 | April - Sept. 06 | USA Today | 1 | right | Tabloid |

Notes: a) Rank among top ten paid-for dailies in terms of circulation according to World Press Trends 2005 (WAN).

Table A.2: List of survey variables

| Indicator | EES items | WVS items |
|---|--|--|
| Newspaper exposure (filter variable) | V069: And how many days of the week do you read a newspaper? Scale from 0 (never) to 7 (every day). Recoded: "never" → 0; else → 1. V070 (Sweden only): Do you usually read one or several newspapers regularly? With regularly I mean at least one time a week? 0 = no; 1 = yes. | V223: For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you used it last week (1) or did not use it last week (2) to obtain information: daily newspaper. Recoded: 1 → 1; 2 → 0. (New Zealand constructed from original New Zealand WVS dataset) |
| Voting | V114: And if there was a general election tomorrow, which party would you vote for? Recoded: "none", "refused", "would not vote" and "d/k, n/a" → 0; else → 1. | V231: If there were a national election tomorrow, for which party on this list would you vote? Recoded: "None", "I would not vote", "Don't know" and "No answer" → 0; else → 1 |
| Vote intention (left / right) | Based on V114. Left/right assignment according to Manifesto left-right scale | V231. Left/right assignment according to Manifesto left-right scale |
| Income | V230: Income scale (scale of 1 - 5) | V253: On this card is a scale of incomes on which 1 indicates the "lowest income decile" and 10 the "highest income decile" in your country. We would like to know in what group your household is. Recoded: 1 and 2 → 1; 3 and 4 → 2; 5 and 6 → 3; 7 and 8 → 4; 9 and 10 → 5. |
| Education | V216: How old were you when you stopped full-time education? | V239: At what age did you (or will you) complete your full time education, either at school or at an institution of higher education? (New Zealand imputed from V238) |
| Ability naming important problems/aims of country | V319 / V028: Of those you have mentioned what would you say is the single most important problem? Recoded: "none" and "no response" → 0; else → 1. | V69: People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. On this card are listed some of the goals which different people would give top priority. Would you please say which one of these you, yourself, consider the most important? Recoded: "No answer" and "Don't know" → 0; else → 1. |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Ability of left-right self-placement | V134: In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? 10-point scale. Recoded: any number on scale à 1; "refused" and "d/k, n/a" à 0. | V114: In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the right." How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking? 10-point scale. Recoded: any number on scale à 1; "refused" and "d/k, n/a" à 0. |
| Trade union membership | V215: Are you yourself a member of a trade union or is anyone else in your household a member of a trade union? Recoded: "yes, I am" and "yes both" à 1; else à 0. | V27: Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organizations. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organization: labor union? Recoded: "Active member" and "Inactive member" à 1; "Don't belong" à 0. |
| Church attendance | V229: How often do you attend religious services: several times a week (1), once a week (2), a few times a year (3), once a year or less (4), or never (5)? Reversed. | V186: Apart from weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services these days? More than once a week (1); Once a week (2); Once a month (3); Only on special holy days (4); Once a year (5); Less often (6); Never, practically never (7). Recoded: 1 à 5; 2 à 4; 3 and 4 à 3; 5 and 6 à 2; 7 à 1. |
| Interest in politics | V154: To what extent would you say you are interested in politics? Scale from 1 (very) to 4 (not at all) à Reversed. | V95: How interested would you say you are in politics? Scale from 1 (Very interested) to 4 (Not at all interested) à Reversed. |
| Trust/confidence in government | V131: Please tell me on a score of 1-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out: [country] government. Scale from 1 (not trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). | V138: I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence (1), quite a lot of confidence (2), not very much confidence (3) or none at all (4): the government (in your nation's capital)? Reversed. |
| Trust/confidence in parliament | V129: Please tell me on a score of 1-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out: [country] parliament. Scale from 1 (not trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). | V140: I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence (1), quite a lot of confidence (2), not very much confidence (3) or none at all (4): parliament? Reversed. |
| Age | V218: What year were you born? Recoded to reflect age in years. | V237: This means you are ____ years old. |
| Gender | V217: Are you ... [gender]? 1 = male; 2 = female. Recoded: "male" à 1; "female" à 0. | V235: Respondent's sex. 1 = male; 2 = female. Recoded: "male" à 1; "female" à 0. |
| TV exposure | V034: Normally, how many days of the week do you watch the news on television? Scale from 0 (never) to 7 (every day). Recoded: "never" à 0; else à 1. | V224: For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you used it last week (1) or did not use it last week (2) to obtain information: news broadcasts on radio or TV. Recoded: 1 à 1; 2 à 0. (New Zealand constructed from original New Zealand WVS dataset) |

Table A.3: Content Analysis: Key Numbers and Reliability

| | number of articles in sample | share of relevant articles in % ¹ | article recall (Cronbach's a) ² | number of entity hits | precision entity hits ³ | precision of party recognition (Cronbach's a) ⁴ |
|----------------------|------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Australia | 6'199 | 29.7 | | 6'197 | | 0.904 |
| Austria | 2'772 | 47.2 | | 8'617 | | 0.932 |
| Canada | 3'693 | 43.9 | | 11'166 | | 0.975 |
| France | 10'286 | 47.6 | | 17'622 | | 0.971 |
| Germany | 5'248 | 42.2 | | 15'447 | | 0.957 |
| Ireland | 3'760 | 46.2 | | 8'155 | | 0.945 |
| Italy | 10'233 | 36.9 | | 19'885 | | 0.865 |
| Mexico | 5'923 | 61.9 | 0.913 | 29'055 | 79.0 | 0.977 |
| Netherlands | 3'242 | 32.3 | | 3'625 | | 0.955 |
| New Zealand | 2'443 | 47 | | 6'176 | | 0.953 |
| Spain | 5'178 | 57 | | 25'326 | | 0.997 |
| Sweden | 2'935 | 34.8 | | 5'324 | | 0.972 |
| Switzerland (German) | 1'904 | 19 | 0.895 | 1'734 | 95.6 | 0.973 |
| Switzerland (French) | 5'559 | 38.5 | | 7'163 | | 0.888 |
| Britain | 9'035 | 36.3 | | 7'762 | | 0.926 |
| USA | 1'935 | 39.1 | | 3'745 | | 0.989 |

Notes: ¹ Articles containing at least one actor or institution; ² Reliability between automated search and manual control of 100 articles in Mexico (country with the highest share of relevant articles) and 100 articles in the German speaking part of Switzerland (country with the lowest share of relevant articles); ³ Percentage of correct entity recognition in 100 Articles in Mexico and Switzerland (German); ⁴ Correlation of party shares in newspapers and parties vote shares in previous election.