

Television and Political Participation among Adolescents. The Impact of Television Viewing, Entertainment and Information Preferences.

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S U M M A R Y

Abstract

While sweeping statements about the effect of television viewing on political participation could still be found in the literature in the 1990s, it is now commonly held that the effect of television should be studied as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Not only the time spent watching television but also the kinds of programs being watched and even the preference for particular stations are assumed to have an effect. In this article, we report on a survey among 6,330 Belgian adolescents allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between various dimensions of television viewing and political participation. We focus on adolescents, because research suggests that the decline in participation levels clearly manifests itself in this age group. The results of the analysis confirm a negative impact of the amount of television viewing, which is partly counterbalanced by a positive impact of a preference for information and for public broadcasting. We discuss the implications of these findings among adolescents for adult participation behavior.

Introduction

The impact of television on political participation has been a matter of recurrent concern within communication research. During the 1990s, this debate was still conducted in very broad terms, with various publications depicting a stereotypical view of a new generation of ‘couch potatoes’ (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000). In subsequent research, however, this gloomy picture has been greatly modified. The uses-and-gratification approach suggests that audiences actively select the media content they are exposed to, which implies that rather than expecting general media effects, attention should be focused on specific media contents (Vincent & Basil, 1997). The available research results are indeed far from conclusive.

First of all, the negative relationship between the amount of time television viewing and political participation levels has not been confirmed by all available studies, and a number of authors even detect a positive relationship between participation levels and certain types of programs (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

Second, a number of authors have also argued that the effects of television are dependent on various dimensions of the phenomenon (Moy et al., 2004; Pasek et al., 2006). Within the uses-and-gratifications approach, researchers have introduced a distinction between the entertainment and information function of television use (Rubin, 1983). Building on this distinction, Prior (2005, 2007) argues that the entertainment use of television is negatively associated with political knowledge and political participation, while the opposite relationship is observed for the information function of television. This uses-and-gratifications approach toward the study of television effects has gained salience as a

result of the emergence of high-choice media environments. Given that the choices available to media consumers have multiplied during the past decades, it can be assumed that the differentiation of television effects has increased accordingly (Prior, 2007). The range of media options available allows viewers to make an effective selection, resulting in a closer fit between their prior motivations and their actual viewing behavior.

Third, not just the types of programs being watched can be expected to differentiate television effects, but the different broadcast stations too may cultivate specific political orientations, as their aim is to encourage station loyalty among potential viewers. The habit of watching specific channels could therefore be related to specific value orientations among a particular group, even controlling for program content (Mendelsohn & Nadeau, 1996). Television networks try to promote brand loyalty among their viewers, which might lead to the development of habitual viewing behaviors among specific audience groups (Eastman & Ferguson, 1997). In various European countries with a strong public broadcasting tradition, differences have been documented between the relative effects of regularly viewing public or commercial broadcasting (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Jenssen, 2009; Schmitt-Beck, 2008).

What is missing thus far in the literature is a comprehensive account of these various dimensions of television effects: if we simultaneously consider the time spent on television, the types of programs watched, *and* the preferences for specific channels, what is the overall picture that emerges? Does the inclusion of a measure for viewers' preference for entertainment imply that television viewing as such (as a general measure) no longer has a significant effect on participation levels? In the current high-choice media environment, we should no longer expect the occurrence of general media effects, but we

should focus on content-specific and station-specific effects, as audiences expose themselves to specific media contents. The process of ‘interest maximation’ allows viewers to achieve a close fit between their preferences and actual viewing behavior (Jeffres, 1978).

In this article, we develop a comprehensive account of the effects of various dimensions of television viewing behavior on political participation by analyzing data from a representative sample of adolescents in Belgium. Our contribution to the debate lies in the simultaneous inclusion of all theoretically relevant variables, which allows us to assess whether it makes sense to distinguish between these various components of television viewing. We focus on adolescents because media effects can be expected to be stronger in this age group than among adult audiences (Arnett, 1995). Furthermore, various studies have shown that the decline of participation levels in Western democracies is concentrated among younger age cohorts (Kimberlee, 2002; Li and Marsh, 2008; O’Toole et al., 2003; Wattenberg, 2007). Belgium offers a good case study because of the strong presence of a public broadcasting system, allowing us to distinguish between the effects of commercial and public broadcasting (Jenssen 2009). In the remainder of this article we will briefly review the literature on the relationship between television viewing and political participation. The review of the literature will be structured on the three major issues we distinguished: time, programs and channels. Next, we present the data, methods and the operationalization of the variables. The results of a regression analysis are then presented, followed by discussion of the relevance of these findings.

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Conclusion and discussion

Despite the fact that not all relations proved to be equally significant, a clear pattern does emerge, allowing a partial confirmation of our three hypotheses. First, we observe a significant negative relation between television viewing time and two out of three participation types, which is in line with Hypothesis 1. While most of the research on adults has failed to confirm the effect of television viewing time, this effect was clearly observed among this sample of adolescents. One explanation might be that, for adolescents, the average weekday is highly standardized. Since compulsory schooling is universal in Belgium, adolescents are typically at school from 8 AM to about 4 PM. On weekdays, their leisure time is therefore concentrated between 4 PM and 10 PM. During these hours, there is apparently a trade-off between time spent watching television or time spent on various forms of participation. Among adults, on the other hand, daily routines are much less standardized, suggesting that the competition between television and other forms of behavior might be less direct.

With regard to program preference, Hypothesis 2 was partly confirmed, but in a slightly different direction than expected. We did not find much evidence for a negative impact of entertainment programs, but we did find evidence for a positive impact of a preference for news. While the effect of an entertainment preference is usually negative or insignificant, a news preference is associated with higher levels of participation and this is the only media use variable that is significantly related to all three forms of participation. In line with Prior's argument, this would suggest that the main problem for engagement and participation is not that citizens watch entertainment programs, but rather that the time devoted to watching the news could be declining among some media

audiences.

For Hypothesis 3, results are similar. While a preference for commercial stations was negatively related to two forms of participation, we observed a positive relation between public broadcasting and the third form of participation.

The current analysis builds on a number of previous studies, but at the same time it has a number of specific characteristics. With regard to validity, it should be mentioned that this analysis was based on a representative sample of adolescents in a European country with a strong tradition of public broadcasting. Previous studies have either been conducted among adults or among a highly selective sample of adolescents. A first, sobering finding for this age group is that information viewing is clearly not the main activity. When questioned about their program preferences, only some 10 per cent of respondents mention news and current affairs programs. This does not mean they never watch television news: most schools will try to encourage the habit of watching the television news in one way or another, but this is clearly not the adolescents' first preference. Their viewing habits seem largely determined by a preference for entertainment programs that is clearly stronger than the preference for information. Adolescents also prefer commercial stations, which are mentioned almost three times as often as public stations. Given these limitations, however, we can observe that the current study supports most of the hypotheses, although the observed relations are sometimes a little different than originally expected. We can conclude that regular viewers participate less often, while there seems to be a positive relation between political participation and both a news preference and a preference for public broadcasting. Thus, the negative

assumptions about the impact of television viewing are more strongly confirmed than in most of the research among adults. Including all the other components of television watching, we still find that television time as such has a significant negative impact on participation levels. While a news preference has a strong positive effect on participation, it should be noted, however that studies by Prior (2007) have shown that the percentage of viewers that regularly watch news broadcasts has steadily declined, possibly weakening this effect at an aggregate level. Self-evidently, this does not yet entail any claim about causality. We can assume that exposure to television content is selective: viewers who are not interested in politics and/or public affairs will be less inclined to expose themselves to political information, and they are clearly also less likely to participate in political life. Whether or not the exposure to media content has additional effects on participation is a research question that can only be answered satisfactorily by relying on panel data.

Given the current state of research, it remains unclear what this implies for the general claim about the impact of television on political participation. On the one hand, it could be argued that adolescents are a very specific group. Their agency options are much more restricted than is the case among adults: their days are heavily scheduled by school requirements, while they are also less autonomous in how they spend their leisure time (e.g., with regard to mobility or finances). Simply watching television, therefore, might not always be a real choice for this group, but it could also serve as a default option if other preferred activities cannot be pursued. An optimistic assumption (which runs counter to the evidence presented by Prior, however) could be that as this group progresses in the life-cycle, their program preferences will diversify, gradually including

more news and current affairs programs than is the case in this cross-sectional observation.

On the other hand, it must be noted that participation patterns tend to be established quite early in the life-cycle. Individuals that are already active at age 16 generally continue to be involved when they grow older (Hooghe 2004). The fact that the negative relation between television and participation can already be observed at this age, could therefore imply more negative long-term consequences for participation levels. The current data do not allow us to disentangle these long-term consequences, as this would require panel survey data that are not currently available, or at least not for this age group. But what this study among adolescents demonstrates is that there might be more reasons for concern than is acknowledged in most of the current literature. While it might be true that television watching should be considered as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and that programs and stations do have specific content and effects, the overall negative relation between watching television and participation levels can be clearly established among adolescents. Preferences for news and for public broadcasting partly mitigate this negative relation, but they fail to fully compensate for it.