

# Does Television Matter in Political Participation?

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## Abstract

Politically engaged citizenry is often considered a symbol of a healthy democracy. Political engagement, disengagement, apathy, cynicism etc are hotly debated in the context of general assumption that in many nations around the globe, the number of citizens who disengaged from politics is increasing day-by-day. Therefore, it is relevant to address the queries following: What are the factors affecting political participation? Are there any phenomena that induce people for political disengagement? To what extent, mass media influence political participation? These are the general questions probed in political participation research for the last several decades. This paper explores the extent and scope of such research on how television, in particular, affects several facets of political participation.

## Keywords

Political Participation, Political Disengagement, Video Malaise Thesis, Television and Political Alienation, Political Apathy and Cynicism

Van Deth (2008) defined political participation as any kind of activity taken up by citizens in a way to influence political and voting decisions of the public. Van Deth disregards the activities of politicians and civil servants as political participation. According to him, the term refers to a citizen's participation in activities like voting, articulating voices of dissent, demonstrating protest, signing petitions, etc. The political scientist discounts the act of watching television or merely having interest in politics as political engagement. Verba and Nie (1972) hold the view that obtaining a membership in a political party does not qualify the term political participation. Moreover, merely exercising franchise cannot also be called political participation. They provide a definition of political participation as "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (p.2). According to this, one can ascertain that mere franchise and representation in political parties cannot be called political activity. According to Milbrath and Goel, political

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activities include a citizen's voting and active involvement in the formation of a community's political and voting decisions (1977).

Ellen Quintelier and Marc Hooghe (2011) throw light on the term political participation with a wider perspective. According to them, political participation is any way of communicating the issues of public relevance to the authorities concerned, and enforcing them to act in favour of the public's demands. It is only when citizens articulate their needs and put pressure upon the political decision makers to realize their demands, political participation is made possible (p.628). Most scholars are of the view of the normative political theory that political participation from the part of citizens is considered pivotal in any democratic political scenario (Dalton, 2005). Michael X. Delli Carpini (2004) enumerates four qualities that constitute political participation:

1. Citizens should stick to values and norms of democracy.
2. They should have well-established convictions concerning the political and social world's character.
3. Should develop a firm stance in matters of significant public interest.
4. Should be able to influence the public's social behavior in a way to improve the quality of their life.

Van Deth (2008) discusses different methods and forms of political participation. According to him, among all such activities, voting is the most basic and systematic way to participate in politics. Other types of participation include campaigning and electioneering. Maintaining contact with political leaders or officials also is a form of the same. Showcasing protest is another means and mode to ensure political participation. Van Deth maintains that the potential and quality of democracy is very much depended on political participation. According to Deth (2008) "democracy is not worth its name if it does not refer to government by the people; hence democracy cannot function without some minimum level of political participation" (p. 531).

Many researches have been carried out in the area of political participation. In the past 50 years, what encourages and socialises individuals to participate actively in politics and democracy is a topic that social scientists are becoming more and more interested in. (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). Citizens' participation in the whole process of election and voting has been subjected to various studies, especially to trace out the reasons for the lack of interest showcased by citizens in the most rudimentary democratic activity, i.e., exercising their franchise (Teixeira, 1987) and additional political spheres of activity (Putnam 2000). A few other scholars are more interested in other

aspects of politics like people's confidence in the government (Capella & Jamieson, 1996) and trust in the whole ruling affairs (Damico, Conway, & Damico, 2000). The factors such as decline in voting turnout, and political engagement have induced research on political participation and civic engagement (Verba Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Bennett & Bennett, 1985).

### **Mass Media and Political Participation**

Mass media have the capacity to galvanize people toward political participation on the one hand and at the same time, mass media can work as to dampen their enthusiasm in the same. In democratic societies, the act of providing information is not the only role of mass media. Mass media can influence variegated political aspects of an individual and also a community. Eveland Jr and Scheufele (2000) believe that the phrase "mobilizing information" describes the functions of media in furnishing information to the people. This phrase does not contain mere information about political structure or the political players thereof. It also implies empowering people so that they can see into issues concerning their societies and encouraging them into political activities of different sorts. Merritt and Rosen (1995) opine that mass media that are focused in news, particularly the print news media, can impart the know-how about politics and thereby ensure people's participation in it. Investigations have been made into understanding media's involvement in political participation. Scholars have identified evidence to establish the link between media and public participation in politics (Lasswell, 1948; McLeod et al., 1996).

There is negative as well as positive correlations between the consumption of media and political participation. The positive aspects of such correlation are creation of interest in politics and facilitating acquisition of knowledge and preparing the viewers to participate in political processes. The adverse effect of the association between media use and political engagement is that the media can encourage cynicism, ignorance, disinterest and lack of sympathy for political movements and activities (Delli Carpini, 2004). The past few decades have witnessed a lack of interest on the part of citizens to participating in elections. This trend is most evident in western countries. Less percentage of participation in voting justifies the existence of this trend among people. The studies clearly cite demographic differences as reasons for the development of political apathy (Rubenson et al., 2004; Gidengil et al., 2004). The tendency of citizens not being interested in casting their votes is a growing trend along with decrease in the number of people joining political parties. This trend is more pronounced with the absence of confidence between individuals engaged in politics (Putnam 1995 a; 1995 b).

## **Television and Political Participation**

News created and imparted by television channels on politics also has positive and negative influences on people. The positive side is that television acts as a source for political information. At the same time, the same television can create among people cynicism and apathy. They can also influence political participation and electoral exercises. The following are some of the studies that have been carried out on various facets of political participation over the years.

During the American elections for the post of president in 1952, Eulau and Schneider (1956) subjected to their studies the relationships between some aspects of political involvement by citizens. Their studies showed that those voters who had more access to information imparted by mass media were more active in the political process. These voters were more inclined to partisan tendencies on political problems and the election of candidate. They were found to be more interested in exercising their franchise than others.

Contrary to this finding, studies (Lang and Lang 1956) conducted during the same period showed that there was a decline in the number of citizens who were exposed to television campaigns. The argument was nullified by many other studies later based on data collected during subsequent elections. An increase of political participation was identified with the ones who watched television.

In a study conducted by William Erbe (1964), it was found that there existed three independent variables and a dependent variable in the interactions between political engagement and the media. Socio-economic background, reference group involvement and alienation are the independent variables. Erbe's study indicated an agreeable relationship between political participation and socio-economic status as its results. According to Erbe alienation among people from political participation is an outcome of low social status and less engagement in organisational bodies like political parties.

The connection between involvement in politics and media exposure has also been found in a study conducted by John S. Jackson. (1971) titled "The Political Behaviour and Socio-economic Backgrounds of Black Students: The Antecedents of Protest." According to this study, among the young black community, there was a more spirited political participation and propaganda owing to media consumption. The social makeup and levels of political engagement of people in the United States, Mexico, Italy, West Germany, and Great Britain were examined by Paul Burstein (1972). Burstein discovered that there was strong correlation between media exposure and political engagement prompting political participation.

Towards finding the relationship between television and cynicism on the part of voters, B.E. Pinkleton and Erica Weintraub Austin conducted a probe in 2001. They found out that those who had access to newspaper were less cynical and more positive about politics. On the other hand, there was cynicism created among citizens who depended on television for their election news. The researchers explained that those who read newspapers were less cynical because they were served more knowledge on electioneering than through other forms of media. In 2008, researchers Matthijs Elenbaas and De Vreese also discovered a relationship between access to systematic political campaigns and cynicism when they probed into the relationship between political cynicism and systematic news consumption. This study was conducted basing the trends in European countries.

Weiwu Zhang and Stella C. Chia also researched the influence of the press and social power on political engagement in 2006. These researchers used a telephone survey to glean information. The survey was conducted in Clarksville in Tennessee. Based on information gathered from the area in 2002, this study demonstrated that the social relationships among people strengthened political participation. The study found out that use of newspaper and television had positive results as far as political participation was concerned in comparison with the use of internet for news.

Regarding the correlation between television exposure and political participation, 6330 Belgian teenagers participated in a study that Quintelier and Hooghe (2011) conducted. Their analysis revealed a negative influence of television exposure compared to what the participants gained through other media.

A majority of analyses made in the above investigations show a positive association between media use and public involvement. Besides, the studies also indicate that media other than a newspaper can create a lack of sympathy and cynicism in most cases.

### **Political Disaffection, Apathy and Cynicism**

Communication scholars and political scientists have discussed negative attitudes demonstrated by people toward political activities. They have pinpointed several reasons for such phenomena.

The phrase “political disaffection” refers to the disagreeable tendencies towards political systems and political parties. Political commentators have shown that such tendencies are marked by an aversion for political systems and they are largely impacted by media, the more significantly by television: “It was initially assumed that disaffection leads the individual to turn away from politics and become apathetic. While this might be the necessary consequence of a

decline in efficacy, a decline in trust or increasing cynicism might also lead to a growth in political participation and more specifically in certain activities beyond the usual forms of participation, such as protest behavior” (Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p.578).

Several scholars have attempted to explain the concepts of political alienation and cynicism in different hues and colours. For instance, Sidney Kraus and Dennis Davis (1976) defined political alienation and explained the nature and traits of alienated persons: “Alienated persons are those who cannot understand social institutions and, in particular, their own relationships to those institutions. Consequently, they experience frustration and anxiety whenever they attempt to engage in political action. These persons should tend to withdraw from all political action and develop attitudes which rationalise or reinforce this withdrawal” (p.181).

Why do people abstain from politics? What are the grounds for such abstention? Many studies have delineated the causes for political abstention and apathy. The tendency of voters not to exercise their franchise is a product of people’s lack of interest in politics and an assumption that politics is not vital. There are also other causes for this lack of interest on the part of citizens and for abstaining from politics. Among them are the economic situation, weak social relationships, displacement, complex voting procedures, the absence of parties representing common people, the decline in number of political organisations, negative propaganda and dependency on media for political information. Studies show that, among those who refuse to cast their votes are young and uninitiated people who are displaced on account of unemployment and reasons of similar kind (Wells, 2008).

Apathy means a lack of interest even in the most fundamental forms of civic involvement. It also means a lack of engagement in political processes and an alienation from political activities. It is an aspect of “political alienation” that includes the aspects of cynicism and little differences between candidates and their stances. As reason for non-engagement in politics by people, political analysts cite apathy and alienation (Austin 2008).

Do news media/political media have any role in fostering political apathy and cynicism? Some researchers and media critics investigated into the queries and blamed the news media for fostering political cynicism in their audience. Inspired from the theory of ‘spiral of silence’, these theoreticians have theorized the phenomenon as “spiral of cynicism.”

News that highlights the electoral performance and the political tussle between candidates during electioneering and the strategies they employ for gaining electoral victory are responsible for creating in the minds of people a

disaffection which results in negative and cynical attitudes among people and hence their alienation from political engagements (Elenbaas & De Vreese 2008). Robinson (1976) had put forward "Video malaise" thesis in one juncture. Several scholars followed suit by arguing that electioneering tactics of political parties such as horse races, vilification campaigns, and sensational and negative coverage of campaign tactics of news media negatively influence people's political beliefs and actions (Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Fallows, 1996; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003).

Of the mass media, television has been accused of fostering political apathy and cynicism. Scholars have found correlation between the phenomena such as rising political cynicism and declining political trust in the U.S with the increasing dependence of their citizens on television for political information and knowledge. Robinson's (1976) video malaise hypothesis also considers television as a key factor in fostering political cynicism. Putnam (1995 a) furnishes three processes through which television negatively impacts citizens' involvement in political activities. They are increased disaffection, a lack trust and time displacement.

## Conclusion

Political participation is either encouraged or discouraged by the role of the mass media. The media can have negative as well as positive impact on political participation. Several investigations have corroborated these facts. Other studies also have discovered that apathy and cynicism, and also disengagement and ignorance, can be created by media exposure.

Apart from imparting political knowledge, news on television can foster political engagement, voters' participation, political cynicism and apathy. There are also arguments that political alienation is created by sensational stories featuring in the media. Researchers and scholars have pointed their fingers at the media for cultivating political cynicism among the people. Among the media, television is more responsible for the creation of cynicism and apathy. The theory known as Video malaise hypothesis also states television as having a significant part in cultivating political cynicism.

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