Maud L. Adriaansen, Philip van Praag and Claes H. de Vreese

A mixed report: The effects of strategic and substantive news content on political cynicism and voting

Abstract: This article examines the effects of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism, turnout intention and voter uncertainty, drawing on two experiments (n = 451, 18–25 year-olds). We found that among less politically knowledgeable citizens, all news mobilizes, but strategic news also induces cynicism. For the more knowledgeable citizens, we found that the combination of strategic and substantive news yields slightly less cynicism and that substantive news makes these citizens reconsider their voting choice. Overall, we only found favorable or neutral effects among the more knowledgeable, while we found both favorable and unfavorable effects among the less knowledgeable. The implications for news effects research are discussed.

Keywords: news framing, mixed frames, strategy news, political cynicism, elections

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To most citizens, the media are important sources of political information (Gra-ber, 2001; Mutz, 1998). Research suggests that news reporting has changed: Substantive news has become less prevalent as strategic news becomes more prevalent and polls are published regularly (e.g., Brants and Van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Scholars worry about the unfavorable effects that this shift may have and indeed found that strategic news coverage can induce political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002) and reduce voter turnout (Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr, 2001). Recently, others have suggested that substantive news content may have favorable effects and found that it can reduce cynicism on the part of younger voters (Adriaansen, Van Praag, and De Vreese, 2010).

To further explore the effects of news content on political cynicism and voter behavior, this article draws on two experiments conducted during a local
election campaign. We study both the potentially unfavorable effects of strategic news content and the potentially favorable effects of substantive news content. Often news items do not consist of either just strategic or just substantive elements, but of a combination of both. It is therefore highly relevant to investigate the effects of strategic and substantive news content separately, as well as combined, which we do in this article.

By studying the effects on both cynicism and voter behavior, we aim to obtain a broader picture of news media effects. Several scholars who study the effects of news use on voter behavior concentrate on turnout (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Min, 2004; Schuck and De Vreese, 2009; Valentino et al., 2001). We propose to add another aspect of voter behavior: uncertainty. Today, citizens hesitate more and longer about which party to vote for than a few decades ago (Van der Kolk, Aarts, and Rosema, 2007). Surprisingly, the effects of news on voter uncertainty had not been studied before.

Our study focuses on younger citizens. These members of tomorrow’s democracy are particularly relevant to study, but of course also present limitations to the ability to generalize our findings. Young people often lack political experience and have not yet had the opportunity to develop stable attitudes and behavior, since politics is relatively new to them (Jennings and Niemi, 1978). Young people cannot yet rely on a broad base of knowledge gathered in the past; consequently it is relatively hard for them to place a news item in a broader context (Graber, 2001; Lau and Redlawsk, 2008). The influence of parents and school decreases whereas peers – such as friends and colleagues – and the media – become more important. Young citizens are therefore potentially more susceptible to news media information (Elenbaas and De Vreese, 2008; McLeod and Shah, 2009; Sears, 1983; Sears and Valentino, 1997).

Unfavorable effects of news content on political cynicism and voter behavior

Many scholars who have studied the effects of media content on political attitudes and behavior have focused on unfavorable effects. In these studies, attitudes and behavior were linked to a variety of media content, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative coverage (Min, 2004; Mutz and Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996), and strategic frames in news coverage (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino et al., 2001). In this article, we focus on the latter: strategic frames in news coverage about political actors (politicians and political parties).
Framing concerns the way information is expressed, in which context information is placed and which aspects are emphasized (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Iyengar and McGrady, 2005). A framing effect occurs when emphasis on specific considerations causes an individual to focus on these considerations when forming his or her opinion (Druckman and Nelson, 2003). These effects can either be caused by an issue-specific frame which pertains to a specific topic or event or by a generic frame which is more general in nature and can pertain to all news topics (De Vreese, 2003; De Vreese, Peter, and Semetko, 2001). In this study we focus on the effects of all strategic news content, which is a generic frame.

According to Cappella and Jamieson, strategic news coverage includes coverage of political gains and losses (often based on poll results), the power struggle between political actors, their performance and the public perception of their performance. Broadly speaking, strategic news also includes ‘horse-race’ or game-oriented news and often words of warfare and (sports) games are used (Jamieson, 1992 in: Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggested that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political participation, a hypothesis which they have called the “spiral of cynicism”. Political cynicism is here to be understood as politicians as the object of political cynicism. According to Easton (1965), positive or negative political attitudes can be directed towards different objects: the political community in general, the regime, and the political authorities. We focus on the authorities since regime and community support is more stable, and for this reason we define political cynicism as a harsh distrust in the reliability and/or competence of politicians.

When the media mainly report the strategies political actors pursue in order to gain or affirm their positions, and their motives are reduced to their individual interests, citizens may start to believe that political actors primarily act in their own self-interest. In this way, strategic news coverage may induce political cynicism. In other words, strategic framing in terms of political actors’ personal interest instead of the public interest results in political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Also, since political actors are believed to act in their own interest, citizens may believe it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions, and this may reduce their willingness to turn out (Valentino et al., 2001). Previous research either found no effect of strategic news on political cynicism (Adriaansen et al., 2010), that effects are short-lived (De Vreese, 2004) or contingent on the level of strategy reporting in the news (De Vreese, 2005), but, based on extant research, we hypothesize that strategic news content induces cynicism (H1a) and reduces turnout intention (H1b).
Favorable effects of news content political cynicism and voter behavior

While unfavorable effects of media content have been studied extensively, only recently has there been attention given to the favorable effects of media content. News coverage that may have favorable effects is substantive news content, also called issue news. Substantive news content provides information about present and future government policy, about the political stances of parties and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag and Van der Eijk, 1998). While strategic news may remind citizens about the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes, substantive news may remind citizens about the issues political actors try to solve and about their societal goals and viewpoints. For this reason, substantive news may reduce cynicism and induce turnout, while strategic news may induce cynicism and reduce turnout.

Some evidence points in this direction: Adriaansen et al. (2010) linked content analysis data to survey data and indeed found a negative relationship between substantive news and political cynicism, specifically among young citizens. We conclude that the evidence is limited but cautiously hypothesize that substantive news content reduces cynicism (H2a) and induces turnout intention (H2b).

The effects of news content on voter uncertainty

While previous research has mainly focused on the effects of news framing on turnout, we draw attention to another aspect of individual voter behavior: uncertainty. Recent research has focused on the antecedents of increasing electoral volatility and has turned to system, party, and voter characteristics (e.g., Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Mair, 2008) to understand why citizens more frequently hesitate when deciding which political party they should vote for (uncertainty) and consequently more often do not vote for the same party in two successive elections (volatility) (Drummond, 2006; Gallagher, Laver, and Mair, 2005; Van der Kolk et al., 2007). Media may have a role in this increased voter uncertainty and therefore it is relevant to explore the effects of different sorts of news content on this phenomenon.

Especially the effects of strategic news on voter uncertainty have not been studied before. Yet if strategic news indeed induces citizens to think that political actors act in their own interest and that it does not matter who represents them in democratic institutions, this may make them hesitate about their voting...
choice. Indeed, Söderlund (2008) shows that voters that are dissatisfied are more likely to switch party. If there is no party which can be trusted, it is much harder to choose. Strategic news can in this case induce uncertainty. However, the idea that no party can be trusted can also make citizens decide to always vote on the same party because it does not matter which party is in office, and in this way strategic news can reduce uncertainty.

In sum, it is hard to predict the effects of substantive and strategic news on voter uncertainty, and because it has not been studied before, we formulate two open questions: (RQ1) What is the effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty and (RQ2) what is the effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty?

Mixed content, mixed effects?

Often, news items do not consist of either just strategic or just substantive news, but of a combination of both (Adriaansen et al., 2010; see also Chong and Druckman, 2007; Matthes and Schemer, 2011; and Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) on competitive news framing). Therefore, we also study the effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in one news item, which has not been done before. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) studied the effects of exposure to both a news item with substantive information and a news item with strategic information. In one of their studies, they found that the effect of a strategic frame on cynicism was mitigated by an issue frame. This net effect on cynicism can either be zero if the size of the effects of strategic and substantive news is equal; the effect can be positive if the effect of strategic news is stronger, or it can be negative if the effect of substantive news is stronger.

The effect of a news item with both a strategic and substantive content is not necessarily the same as the effect of two items which both contain one of the frames. The combination of both frames in one item may lead to a different interaction. It could be that one of the frames is dominant and that, for instance, either strategic news always makes citizens more cynical or that substantive news always makes them less cynical. Also, it is possible that the effects of the combination are not the same for attitudes and behavior. Since it is hard to predict what the exact effect of a combination of strategic and substantive news in an article will be, we have formulated an open research question: (R3) What is the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content?
Political knowledge as a moderator of framing effects

Current media effects research is characterized by a focus on conditional factors influencing the effects. This is also the case in framing research in which partisanship and attitude certainty have been investigated as moderators. Political knowledge, however, is regarded as one of the most important individual level moderators of media effects. Scholars, however, disagree about the direction of this moderation (De Vreese and Lecheler, 2011; Shah et al., 2009: 90–91). More generally it is argued that political knowledge influences the impact of new information (Zaller, 1992). Some argue that citizens with low levels of knowledge are more easily affected by news use. For citizens who possess more knowledge, one news item has less impact because it is integrated into a larger existing base of information. Also, high levels of knowledge provide context for interpreting a news item and enable citizens to come up with opposing arguments. Valentino et al. (2001) therefore argued that less knowledgeable citizens have weaker longer-term internal motivations for their political attitudes and behavior. Others have argued the opposite, that more knowledgeable citizens are more easily affected by news use (e.g., Chong and Druckman, 2007). High levels of knowledge facilitate the processing of a news item; since more highly knowledgeable citizens make sense of a news item more easily, a news item will have more impact.

Specifically concerning the impact of strategic news, Valentino et al. (2001) showed that the effect of strategic news on confidence in government and turnout is largest among the least sophisticated citizens. These findings were echoed by De Vreese (2005) and Lecheler and de Vreese (2011), while for other frames it might be the case that more politically aware individuals are more affected (see e.g., De Vreese and Elenbaas, 2008). In sum, we conclude that the effect of knowledge as a moderator is not clear. This can partly be explained by the fact that both the independent and dependent variables in these studies vary. An additional reason may be that the effect is not unidirectional: Some effects are larger among less knowledgeable citizens, while other effects are larger among more highly knowledgeable citizens. We argue that the unfavorable effects of strategic news are larger among less knowledgeable citizens while the favorable effects of substantive news are larger among more highly knowledgeable citizens. While more highly knowledgeable citizens have enough context to put a strategic news item into perspective, less knowledgeable citizens may more easily come to the conclusion that political actors act in their own interest, which in turn affects their attitudes and behavior in an unfavorable manner.
Substantive news, on the other hand, may have a larger impact on more knowledgeable citizens, who can make sense of this information more easily, add it to the knowledge they already have and in this way, substantive news can affect their attitudes and behavior in a favorable manner.

We aim to test these arguments and hypothesize that: (H3a) The unfavorable effects of strategic news content are stronger among citizens with lower levels of knowledge, and (H3b) the favorable effects of substantive news content are stronger among citizens with higher levels of knowledge. As mentioned before, it is debatable whether voter uncertainty is unfavorable or favorable and therefore we do not include an expectation on knowledge as a moderator of the effect of news content on uncertainty.

Data and method

Design and procedure

To investigate the effects of substantive and strategic news, we use an experiment. In a post-test only, between-subjects experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) a news report with a substantive frame, (2) a news report with a strategic frame, (3) a news report with a strategic and substantive frame, and (4) no news report for the control group. We chose a between-subjects design, because we wanted to compare experimental conditions; we did not aim to determine within-subject change before and after exposure.

We conducted two online survey experiments which were comparable, only the policy issue in the stimulus material differed. In both experiments, all respondents first completed a pre-test questionnaire to measure the control variables. Second, respondents read a news report containing one of the frames, (except the respondents in condition 4 (the control group), who did not read a news report). Finally, all respondents answered the post-test questionnaire to map their levels of political cynicism.

Data collection: We used the period before the March 2010 local elections in Amsterdam as our research venue. Our survey data were collected by O+S in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam in February 2010. We selected a representative sample of young citizens between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, who were allowed to vote in local elections for the first or second time in their lives. The respondents were selected from the register office of the city of Amsterdam. The selected respondents received a letter to participate in an
online questionnaire. 451 respondents participated in the study. A between-group comparison of the control variables revealed no between-group difference and therefore, successful randomization of several control variables, except age. For this reason we controlled for age in our analysis.

**Stimulus Material:** In order to increase the external validity of the experiment, we used the same structure as newspaper reports in the Amsterdam-based newspaper *Het Parool* have. Also, the newspaper reports were written by a scholar who has worked as a copy editor. For both experiments we made a version for each of the three conditions: a report with a substantive frame, a report with a strategic frame and a report with strategic and substantive frame. For each version, the title and the introductory paragraph were identical. The other paragraphs were different, but we tried to limit the differences between the conditions. All news reports were of similar length. The newspaper report in each experiment comprised coverage of an issue that was linked to the local election campaign. A poll conducted by the department for research and statistics of the city of Amsterdam revealed that education was the most important policy issue for citizens in Amsterdam, and for Experiment A we therefore chose this as a high importance issue (see Online Appendix A). For Experiment B we chose cycling policy as a low importance issue, to which respondents could relate nevertheless (see Online Appendix B).

**Manipulation Check:** We conducted a pilot study on a different convenience sample (students, \( n = 349 \)) to test the manipulation. After being exposed to the

1 The response rate was 10.3 percent. We do not perceive this as a problem, however. First, representativeness does not increase monotonically with response rates. Second, since we aim to study relationships instead of, for example, the level of political cynicism, variance is the primary precondition, instead of representativeness (Krosnick, 1999). 164 participants were in the experimental conditions in study 1, 171 in the experimental conditions in study 2, and 116 in the control conditions.

2 No significant variation in cell counts was found for gender \((M = 1.59, SD = .492, p = .85)\), education \((M = 8.00, SD = 1.38, p = .51)\), political knowledge \((M = 1.57, SD = .88, p = .32)\) and political interest \((M = 3.43, SD = .63, p = .75)\). Significant variation in cell counts was found for age \((M = 21.94, SD = 2.30, p = .000)\).

3 Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) argued that attitudes towards an issue are stronger when a person attaches more meaning to it and therefore high salience issues have stronger framing effects. While Haider-Markel and Joslyn only studied high salience issues, Lecheler, De Vreese, and Slothuus (2009) found results that contradicted their argument: that low importance issues had large effects, while a high importance issue had no effects. Although the exact effect of high and low importance issue is ambiguous, it is clear that the issue can affect the framing effects and for this reason, we chose a high importance as well as a low importance issue.

4 The assessment of the salience of the issue is thus based on general survey data and not on an individual assessment of the respondent.
stimulus material, respondents were shown five statements and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statements, their answers ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). Two statements were used to measure the “substantiveness” of the reports: (1) The report was mainly about substantive policy issues, and (2) the report dealt with politicians’ viewpoints on policies. These two items were combined in a scale of “substantiveness”. Three statements dealt with the “strategicness” of the newspaper report: (1) The report was about parties’ strategies to win the elections, (2) the report was about the political battle between parties, and (3) the report was about gains and losses in the polls. The manipulation check revealed successful manipulation: The groups differed on the scales of substantiveness and strategicness as well as on the five separate items. We could therefore consider the stimulus material to be appropriate and ascribe differences between groups in the post-test to the experimental manipulation.

**Measures**

**Political cynicism:** We used seven statements developed by Adriaansen, et al. (2010) to measure political cynicism: (1) Politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver, (2) the mayor and aldermen are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than the abilities to become city-councilor, (4) political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion, (5) politicians do not understand what matters for the city, (6) politicians are capable of solving important problems, and (7) most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing. The original items were used to tap political cynicism about national political actors and therefore we translated items 2, 3 and 5 to the local level. The answers on the items ranged from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). The seven items loaded on one dimension and were recoded to a scale of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .78$). The distribution of answers on the seven items is reported in Appendix C.

**Voter behavior:** Turnout intention was measured by asking respondents to indicate with a percentage between 0 and 100 what the chance was that they would actually vote in the upcoming elections ($M = 80.73$, $SD = 29.50$). Voter

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5 The perception of substantiveness differed significantly among Group 1 ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.08$) ($p < 0.01$), Group 2 ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.00$) and Group 3 ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.06$). The perception of strategicness differed significantly ($p < 0.01$) among Group 1 ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .93$), Group 2 ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .92$) and Group 3 ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.13$).
uncertainty was measured by asking respondents what they would vote if the elections were held today. Those who mentioned a party were coded 0, while those who said they did not know were coded 1, those who said they would not vote were coded as missing (17.4 percent were undecided).

**Political knowledge:** The political knowledge scale is based on two open questions: which political parties constitute the Court of Mayor and Aldermen (score ranges between 0 and 2 parties) and what is the name of the Mayor (score ranges between 0 and 1). These questions were combined to a political knowledge score that ranges from 0 to 3 ($M = 1.57, SD = .88$).

## Results

Table 1 shows the per condition means of political cynicism for both experiments as well as separately for Experiment A and Experiment B. Participants in the strategy condition ($M = 4.11$) expressed significantly higher levels of political cynicism than those in the substance and strategy condition ($M = 3.73, p < .01$) and those in the control group ($M = 3.81, p < .05$). This suggests that strategic

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<tr>
<td><strong>Political cynicism total</strong></td>
<td>3.87 (.87)</td>
<td>4.11b (1.04)</td>
<td>3.73c (.94)</td>
<td>3.81x (.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Experiment A: education</td>
<td>3.87 (.91)</td>
<td>4.27e (1.11)</td>
<td>3.61f (.80)</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Experiment B: cycling</td>
<td>3.87 (.84)</td>
<td>3.95 (.95)</td>
<td>3.85 (1.05)</td>
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|                          |               |           |                           |               |
| Turnout intention 0–100 percent$^1$ | 83.38 (26.12) | 83.31 (28.43) | 80.87 (29.05) | 75.46 (33.45) |
| *Experiment A: education$^2$ | 85.48 (22.99) | 81.00 (30.80) | 80.36 (31.36) |               |
| *Experiment B: cycling$^3$ | 80.98 (29.36) | 85.63 (25.91) | 81.34 (26.94) |               |

**Note.** Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). $n = 451$, Experiment 1 $n = 164$, Experiment 2 $n = 171$, control group $n = 116$. All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: bc, ef, ex $p < .01$, bx $p < .05$.

$^1$ The average of the three experimental groups ($M = 82.50, SD = 33.45$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

$^2$ The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment A ($M = 82.29, SD = 28.54$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

$^3$ The average of the three experimental groups in Experiment B ($M = 82.71, SD = 27.26$) differs significantly from the control group ($p < .01$).

Table 1: Political cynicism and turnout intention by experimental condition.
news content induces cynicism and thus provides support for H1a. Participants in the substance condition did not express lower levels of cynicism than the control group and therefore H2a is not supported. Remarkably, respondents in the substance and strategy condition expressed the lowest levels of cynicism, especially in Experiment A, and while the differences with those in the strategy condition were significant, the difference with the control group was not significant. Nevertheless, the results suggest that if news is both relevant in terms of issues and because parties emphasize the differences between them, this makes citizens most trustful of political actors.

All experimental groups displayed higher levels of turnout intention than the control group: The average of the three experimental groups together ($M = 82.50$) differed significantly from that of the control group ($M = 75.46, p < .01$). We did not find support for H1b, and results suggest that perhaps H2b should be adapted: Not only substantive news, but all news content induces turnout intention. The other way around, one can say that a lack of news will reduce turnout intention.

Table 2 shows the level of voter uncertainty. The participants in the substance condition had the highest level of voter uncertainty while those in the strategy condition had the lowest level, but the differences with the control group were not significant. For this reason, the answers to RQ1 and RQ2 are only indicative. They suggest that there is a negative effect of strategic news content on voter uncertainty (R1) and that strategic news induces citizens to think it does not matter who is representing them and consequently reduces voter uncertainty. There was a positive effect of substantive news content on voter uncertainty (R2) and this suggests that substantive information makes

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<th>Control group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter uncertainty</td>
<td>27$^a$</td>
<td>11$^b$</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Experiment A: education</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Experiment B: cycling</td>
<td>27$^g$</td>
<td>6$^h$</td>
<td>19</td>
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*Note.* Data entries are percentages. $n = 451$, Experiment 1 $n = 164$, Experiment 2 $n = 171$, control group $n = 116$. All experimental groups include between 49 and 59 respondents. Reading example: 27 percent of the respondents in the substance condition were undecided which party to vote for, 73 percent did mention a party. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: $ab p < .01$, $gh p < .05$. 

**Table 2:** Voter uncertainty by experimental condition.
people think about politics and for this reason consider more alternatives to vote for.

We expected the effects of media exposure to be larger for low importance issues than for high importance issues, and we therefore included a high as well as a low importance issue. The effects on cynicism were larger for the high importance issue, while the effects on voter uncertainty were larger for the low importance issue. For turnout intention there was no clear difference.

Table 3 shows that with regard to our moderator, we found different results among more knowledgeable respondents than among less knowledgeable respondents. We expected larger unfavorable effects of strategic news among less knowledgeable respondents and larger favorable effects of substantive news among more knowledgeable respondents. This expectation was confirmed for the effect on cynicism. The less knowledgeable in the strategy condition expressed significantly higher cynicism than those in all other groups, while this effect was absent among the highly knowledgeable. This provides initial support for H3a. There was no favorable effect of substantive news on cynicism, neither among the whole sample nor among the more knowledgeable. However, the more knowledgeable in the substance & strategy condition expressed lower cynicism than all other groups. This difference is not significant and therefore not enough to support H3b.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political cynicism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Low knowledge</em></td>
<td>3.92a (.88)</td>
<td>4.45b (1.01)</td>
<td>3.89c (.93)</td>
<td>3.85d (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>High knowledge</em></td>
<td>3.76 (.87)</td>
<td>3.67 (.92)</td>
<td>3.47 (.90)</td>
<td>3.74 (.79)</td>
</tr>
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| **Turnout intention**    |             |           |                           |               |
| *Low knowledge*          | 78.36 (29.62) | 80.22l (28.02) | 76.99 (29.75)            | 65.40l (37.74) |
| *High knowledge*         | 93.00 (13.35) | 87.29 (28.73)  | 87.19 (27.01)            | 90.77 (16.69) |

**Note.** Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B n = 451, low knowledge n = 279, high knowledge n = 172. Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: ab, bc, bd, jl p < .01.

1 The average of the three experimental groups for low knowledge respondents (M = 78.47, SD = 29.06) differs significantly from the control group (p < .01).

2 The average of the three experimental groups for high knowledge respondents (M = 88.56, SD = 24.68) does not differ significantly from the control group.

**Table 3:** Political cynicism and turnout intention by experimental condition and knowledge.
The favorable effect of all news on turnout intention was only visible among the less knowledgeable, while there was no effect at all among the more knowledgeable. This means that the favorable effect of all news on turnout was stronger for less knowledgeable respondents, which is contrary to what we expected in H3a. This may be explained by the effect that turnout intention was very high among all highly knowledgeable respondents: There was no room left for an effect. We therefore conclude that the evidence for H3a is mixed.

We had no prior expectation for knowledge as a moderator of the effects of news on voter uncertainty. Table 4 reveals only significant effects among the highly knowledgeable respondents: Those in the substance condition differed significantly from those in all other groups. This suggests that new information makes only highly knowledgeable citizens reconsider their party choice.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter uncertainty</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Low knowledge</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*High knowledge</td>
<td>25\textsuperscript{c}</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{f}</td>
<td>5\textsuperscript{g}</td>
<td>9\textsuperscript{h}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aggregate results for Experiment A and Experiment B \( n = 451 \), low knowledge \( n = 279 \), high knowledge \( n = 172 \). Different subscripts indicate significant between condition differences: \( \text{ef, eg} \ p < .01, \text{eh} \ p < .05 \).

Table 4: Voter uncertainty by experimental condition and knowledge, percentages.

Our last research question concerns the effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content (R3). With regard to cynicism, we found that those exposed to a combination of substantive and strategic news content expressed the lowest levels of cynicism. Although the differences with the control group were not significant, the differences with the group exposed to strategic news were significant and we therefore conclude that there is a small effect. We also saw that this difference only existed for the highly knowledgeable; due to the small sample size the difference was not significant, but the difference is nevertheless rather large. This suggests that a combination of substantive and strategic news content has a decreasing effect on cynicism among the more knowledgeable. For voter behavior, there was no effect of a combination of substantive and strategic news content. We have summarized all the results in Table 5.
Hypotheses and research questions | Results
---|---
**H1a:** strategy → cynicism ↑ | strategy → cynicism ↑ ✓
**H1b:** strategy → turnout intention ↓ | strategy → turnout intention ↑ ×
**R1:** strategy → uncertainty? | strategy → uncertainty ↓
**H2a:** substance → cynicism ↓ | substance → cynicism no effect ×
**H2b:** substance → turnover intention ↑ | substance → turnover intention ↑ ✓
**R2:** substance → uncertainty? | substance → uncertainty ↑
**R3:** combination of substance and strategy → uncertainty? | substance and strategy → turnover intention ↑
**H3a:** low knowledge: unfavorable effects strategy ↑ | low knowledge: strategy → cynicism ↑ ✓
**H3b:** high knowledge: favorable effects substance ↑ | high knowledge: substance and strategy → cynicism ↓ ✓

*R3*: combination of substance and strategy → cynicism ↓

*Note.* When results do not differ significantly from another experimental group, but not from the control group, results are written in italics. We indicated whether results provide support for the hypothesis (√) or do not provide support for the hypothesis (×) or whether there was no hypothesis (·).

**Table 5:** Hypotheses, research questions and results.

**Discussion**

This article used experiments to study the effects of substantive and strategic news content on political cynicism and voter behavior. We aimed to give a balanced picture of media effects, which can be favorable and unfavorable. We found that strategic news content had an unfavorable effect on cynicism by increasing it, but only among the less politically knowledgeable. When especially those who have low levels of knowledge are affected by strategic news coverage, then an increase of strategic news content in the media may lead to a spiral of cynicism among this group. On the other hand, we found that all news content had a favorable mobilizing effect on the less knowledgeable: Those exposed to news content expressed higher turnout intention than those not exposed to any news content. This is in contrast to Valentino et al. (2001) who found demobilizing effects of strategic news. While substantive news content had no effect on cynicism, the combination of strategic and substantive news content had a small favorable effect on cynicism among the more knowl-
edgeable. A news item which explains an issue and suggests this issue matters because parties disagree about it makes the more knowledgeable more trustful. This suggests that one need not be worried about the effects of strategic news, as long as it is substantive as well; the combination of strategic and substantive news has no effect on the less knowledgeable and a decreasing effect on cynicism for the more highly knowledgeable.

Other results are less easily interpreted. We found that substantive news makes specifically the more knowledgeable hesitate about party choice. Voter uncertainty is not clearly favorable or unfavorable, but this result suggests that substantive news makes the more knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between parties, which can be interpreted as a favorable development. In the postwar period, voter uncertainty and volatility were low, because many citizens used to vote according to class and religious cleavages, without making their own decision based on ideological evaluations. Our finding yields support for Rose and McAllister's (1986) idea that the increase of voter uncertainty and volatility is a sign that citizens make a party choice more consciously than before. Substantive news seems to stimulate this conscious choice, especially among the more knowledgeable. On the individual level, we need not worry about these unstable voters. Nevertheless, an increase in hesitating and changing voters can have unfavorable consequences on the system level. Large shifts in the percentage of votes for each party during elections can make the political system unstable, and frequently changing parties in government can erode the stability of governmental policies, especially in consensus democracies with coalition governments.

Earlier studies suggested that the effects of news are moderated by political knowledge. We find that some effects only existed among the less knowledgeable: the unfavorable effect of strategic news on cynicism as well as the favorable effect of all news on turnout. Other effects only existed among the more knowledgeable: the favorable effect of the combination of substantive and strategic news on cynicism as well as the effect of substantive news on voter uncertainty, suggesting they consciously reconsider their choices. This means that we can conclude that knowledge moderates the effects of news content in a different way than most previous studies have suggested.

We found both favorable and unfavorable effects on the less knowledgeable while we only found favorable effects on the more knowledgeable. This is remarkable: Especially the less knowledgeable seem to be prone to unfavorable media effects. This finding may be contingent on the aspects of citizens’ attitudes and behavior which we have studied – media may have unfavorable effects on other aspects of more knowledgeable citizens’ attitudes and behavior. However, if it is true that media specifically affect the less knowledgeable in
an unfavorable manner, this may be a problem for democratic systems in the future.

Our findings are exploratory with respect to the combination of strategic and substantive in one news item. Moreover, our findings pertain in particular to young people, and we have a somewhat convenient sample at hand, additionally hampered by the response rate. These shortcomings notwithstanding, we believe our findings have broader implications: A few decades ago, a majority of citizens was exposed to political news, not because they liked it, but because they were confronted with it on the same network as their favorite shows, an effect which was dubbed the “trap effect” (Schoenbach and Lauf, 2002; 2004). Today many more networks, as well as the internet, are available and consumers can choose to watch networks that do not broadcast political information or only political information related to a specific ideology (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). Prior (2007) showed for the US that the fragmentation of the media market resulted in a growing gap between more highly educated news junkies on the one hand and the rest of the citizens who consume less politically substantive information on the other. The same pattern might be visible in many European countries.

We have shown that news – ceteris paribus – induces participation among the less knowledgeable, and a lack of political information may therefore reduce participation among this group. In an experimental study, information exposure is controlled, while in the real world, citizens can choose to use information – or not to use it. Many less knowledgeable citizens often choose the latter. If less knowledgeable citizens consume little political information, this little information may have large effects on their levels of cynicism. In this way, information can lead to a spiral of cynicism – but also reverse it. For this reason it matters a lot which information they consume – substantive, strategic, or both.

**Bionotes**

**Dr. Maud Adriaansen** has a PhD from the University of Amsterdam and is currently Research Manager at Mindshare.

**Dr. Philip van Praag** is senior associate professor in The Amsterdam School of Communication Research and the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam.

**Prof. Dr. Claes H. de Vreese** is professor and chair of political communication in The Amsterdam School of Communication Research and the Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam.
References


Appendix C: Political cynicism items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements about reliability:</th>
<th>fully disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>fully agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver</em></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>the mayor and aldermen are primarily self-interested and friends more important than abilities to become city-councillor</em></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion</em></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements about competence:</th>
<th>fully disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>fully agree</th>
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</thead>
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<td><em>politicians do not understand what matters to the city</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>politicians are capable of solving important problems</em></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>most politicians are competent people who know what they do</em></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. Data entries are percentages. \( n = 459 \).

Table C1: Distribution of answers on the seven political cynicism items.