When Good News Is Bad News: Explicating the Moderated Mediation Dynamic Behind the Reversed Mobilization Effect

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This study investigates the mobilizing potential of positive news framing on opponents of a referendum proposal. On the basis of an experiment (N = 470), using bootstrapping as a method to assess conditional indirect effects, mediation analysis showed that positive news framing—endorsing a referendum proposal regarding European Union (EU) integration—was perceived as negative by opponents and mobilized those with higher levels of skepticism toward the EU to turn out and vote because of increased risk perception. This “reversed mobilization” effect was contingent upon existing levels of self-efficacy, yielding evidence for a “double conditional indirect effect” of positive news framing on turnout intention via risk perception which was strongest among those showing greater levels of EU skepticism as well as stronger self-efficacy beliefs.


What are the underlying processes that determine mobilization in an election campaign? Previous research has repeatedly shown that negative information and negative attitudes have more of an impact on subsequent evaluations and behavior than their positive equivalents (Fiske, 1980; Lau, 1985; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). However, most research on campaign and framing effects assumes that only negative information can induce negative attitudes and mobilize individuals. Instead, we consider the perception of campaign messages crucial for a better understanding of the psychology behind framing effects with regards to mobilization. Previous research has called for more attention to the underlying mechanisms behind the mobilization of voters in response to campaign messages (see e.g., Martin, 2004, 2008; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003) and also to the importance of applying more elaborate methods to assess such mediation dynamics (see e.g., Bizer & Petty, 2005; Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008a; Tao & Bucy, 2007).

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In this study, we show how positive news framing of a referendum proposal is seen as negative by opponents of the proposal and we demonstrate how this matters for the activation of subsequent psychological processes and behavioral intentions. More in particular, we show how positive news framing induces higher risk perceptions among individuals who are in opposition to the proposal. In turn, and in line with existing research on the mobilizing potential of risk perception (e.g., Rimal & Real, 2003) and the influence of negative attitudes on subsequent behavior (e.g., Jordan, 1965), we show that opponents become mobilized against the referendum proposal in order to prevent it from being implemented. We refer to this dynamic as “reversed mobilization.”

We are primarily concerned with the mobilizing effect of positive news framing on opponents of a referendum proposal. Previous research has shown that in most instances the inherent risk for voters in a referendum is greater for opponents of a referendum proposal as they are the ones who are confronted with a potential change in case of a positive outcome (Christin, Hug, & Sciarini, 2002; Kirchgassner & Schulz, 2004). This prospect of unwanted change, in turn, bears the potential for a mobilization dynamic in the way we describe. For supporters of a referendum proposal, a negative outcome represents less of a risk since, in most instances, it would not mean unwanted change but rather just maintaining the status quo. Thus, the potential costs associated with a referendum outcome opposed by an individual are usually higher for opponents than for supporters. In this study, we therefore focus on the mobilizing effect of positive news framing on opponents of a referendum proposal because it is empirically less explored and theoretically more relevant than the effect of negative news framing on supporters.

We investigate the mobilizing effect of positive news framing on opponents of a referendum proposal within the context of the signing of the European Union (EU) Treaty of Lisbon in December 2007 which provides a suitable context for our objective. When the EU Constitutional draft, which preceded the Treaty of Lisbon, was rejected in two national referendums in the Netherlands and France in 2005, it evoked a strong response in public debate. Several EU member countries contemplated holding a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon and two referenda were held in Ireland which sparked discussions about the (il-)legitimacy of not holding referendums in other countries as well.

Theoretical framework

Negativity matters for mobilization
The observation that “negative” is stronger than “positive” has been supported in relation to a broad range of psychological phenomena (see e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenhauer, & Vohs, 2001). Previous research has repeatedly shown that negative information has more impact on subsequent attitudes and evaluations than positive appeals (e.g., Lau, 1985). People pay more attention to negative information and also weigh in negative information more heavily in subsequent
judgments as compared to positive information (Fiske, 1980; Pratto & John, 1991). In an election context, Kahn and Kenney (1999) report how negative messages produced greater interest and involvement in a campaign (see also Martin, 2008).

In addition to the greater appeal and impact of negative messages, negative attitudes have been shown to be more likely to affect subsequent behavior as compared to positive attitudes (e.g., Jordan, 1965). Most prominently, prospect theory argues that people are more likely to get mobilized in order to avoid risks rather than to achieve potential gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). In this respect, information that is framing future prospects as potential “risks” has been shown to be more mobilizing than information that is framed in terms of potential “gain” (Schneider et al., 2001). In an election context, Kernell (1977), for example, showed how negative opinions of the President had a stronger effect on turnout in U.S. midterm elections than positive opinions. Along these lines, Martin (2004) provides an example of how perceived candidate threat can mobilize voters “against” another candidate in an election campaign (see also Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen, 2000).

In this perspective, feeling threatened by a certain candidate is supposed to result in anxiety, which results in political participation as a proactive response due to increased arousal and attention. Being confronted with the threat of potential policy change on issues that are considered important by voters has also been shown to motivate forms of political activism, such as financial contributions to activist groups, in order to protect the existing policy (Miller & Krosnick, 2002). Furthermore, Hastings, Kane, Staiger, and Weinstein (2007) show how past negative election outcomes (i.e., having been on the losing side) mobilize voters to participate in subsequent elections more than past positive outcomes (i.e., having been on the winning side). Thus, previous research has substantiated the claim that negative information has more of an impact than positive information and that negative attitudes are more likely to motivate behavior than positive attitudes.

However, most studies assume that only negative information is seen as negative and operates as such on a psychological level. This assumption seems disputable at best and unreasonable for the following reason. As Sigelman and Kugler (2003) rightly point out, information in a campaign is understood differently by voters. They argue that campaign tone should not be seen as an objective attribute of a campaign and that perceptions of the same campaign can vary widely between citizens and evoke different images in the minds of voters. The authors state: “Although researchers have treated negativity purely as an attribute of campaigns, we contend that to have the effects that are so often attributed to it, negative campaigning must be perceived by the citizens whose behaviour we are trying to explain” (p. 143). Along the same lines, Martin (2008) points out that “citizens do not equally read campaigns as negative or positive, and therefore do not have consistent reactions to campaigns that scholars consider ‘negative’” (p. 190). Recently, Tao and Bucy (2007) have argued that media effect researchers should indeed pay more attention in their research designs to the psychological responses to media messages rather than to the attributes of message content only. A more thorough investigation of the perception of campaign messages
in interaction with pre-existing attitudes might yield further insight into how and under what conditions campaign messages can translate into political participation. This effort seems to be especially valuable considering the striking lack of empirical research clearly specifying and investigating the underlying mechanisms behind the mobilization of voters in response to campaign messages as recent research has pointed to (e.g., Martin, 2004, 2008).

In this study, we argue that positive news framing in a referendum campaign is seen as negative by voters who are in opposition to the proposal and induces higher risk perception regarding the issue at stake. Indeed, previous framing studies have argued that existing opinions have to be taken into account in order to arrive at a better understanding of framing effects (Bizer & Petty, 2005). We argue that pre-existing attitudes establish a reference point from which campaign messages are seen as either positive or negative. Thus, not all negative information is seen as negative and not all positive information is seen as positive from an individual point of view. Consequently, positive news about a referendum proposal can be seen as negative by an individual who is opposed to it, resulting in a consistent bias that is contingent upon pre-existing attitudes. At the same time, the same differential psychological effects with regard to the stronger impact of negativity apply as discussed above. However, in order for negativity to exert its effect, we argue that it is important to consider how information is understood from an individual point of view and in light of existing opinions regarding the issue at stake. An exclusive focus on objective message attributes would only make sense if we assume the majority of citizens’ minds to mirror a tabula rasa, that is not having any pre-existing opinions, or to be completely persuaded by campaign messages. This is unlikely to be the case and it is more likely in election contexts with low salience and only for parts of the electorate. Thus, focusing on the objective attributes of a message alone yields an insufficiently valid indicator for how the actual message content is received on the audience side and for how the psychology behind behavioral effects in response to campaign information can be explained.

Motivated information processing and frame resistance

How then can positive news framing mobilize opponents of a referendum proposal? Importantly, voters can resist campaign messages and arrive at different conclusions than indicated by the objective message content, depending on their pre-existing attitudes. Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, and Garst (2006) provide a good example of how voters with an initial candidate preference arrive at more polarized evaluations in favor of their preferred candidate when exposed to negative information about that candidate. They report how voters selected and spent more time reading negative information about their preferred candidate, yet ended up with more positive evaluations, thus converting incongruent negative information into support for a pre-existing preference. The authors state: “Any ‘raw’ information from the media is, if selected, likely to be used and transformed by voters according to their motivations and pre-existing preferences” (p. 28). This is in line with the concept
of “motivated skepticism,” as introduced by Ditto and Lopez (1992), who point out that information that is inconsistent with existing preferences is examined more intensively and more critically by people. Thus, being confronted with information in a campaign that is opposed to existing opinions can lead voters to engage in motivated information processing in which previous levels of skepticism toward such information can become further strengthened, initial levels of opposition can intensify and attitudes can become more polarized.

In general, being confronted with a perceived threat—ceteris paribus—facilitates message processing and motivates people to resist the persuasive appeal of messages and engage in a process of counterarguing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). At the same time, such in-depth cognitive processing fosters more resistant attitudes (Pfau et al., 2001). Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith (1995), for example, showed how increased thinking about an attitude can further strengthen this attitude, making it less likely to be persuaded by counterattitudinal information. Furthermore, research on media framing effects has pointed out that framing has less of a persuasive impact on subsequent attitudes of individuals when an issue is considered important (Lecheler, de Vreese, & Slothuus, 2009).

In an election context, Bizer and Petty (2005) showed that attitudes are more resistant to persuasion when individuals oppose a certain candidate as when they support another candidate, again pointing to the stronger impact of negative attitudes over positive attitudes. In the context of a referendum, this means that individuals are less likely to be persuaded by positive framing of the referendum issue when they oppose a positive outcome as compared to when they support a negative outcome. In our study context, opponents of the referendum proposal were indeed primarily opposed to a positive outcome (since a positive outcome represented unwanted change), rather than in support of a negative outcome (since a negative outcome only represented maintaining the status quo). However, previous research so far has only investigated if, for example, negative framing of a candidate who is supported by an individual, results in frame and attitude resistance and not if also positive framing of a candidate an individual opposes results in frame resistance (see Bizer & Petty, 2005). In line with our previous reasoning, we assume that positive framing of a referendum outcome opposed by an individual will lead to enhanced message processing and results in stronger negative attitudes toward the issue at stake and higher risk perception which carries the potential to mobilize opponents against the proposal.

Underlying dynamics behind the reversed mobilization effect
In this study, we focus on risk perception as the mechanism accounting for the mobilization of opponents to a referendum proposal in response to positive news framing. Studies in health communication have repeatedly pointed out how message framing can induce a perception of risk among individuals (e.g., Dunlop, Wakefield, & Kashima, 2008), which in turn carries the mobilizing effect to induce preventive action (e.g., Schneider et al., 2001). In electoral contexts, Martin (2004) and Marcus et al. (2000; see also Marcus & MacKuen, 1993) have shown how campaigns can foster
anxiety and threat perception among voters which have the potential to mobilize them to turn out and vote in order to prevent an unwanted scenario. Thus, in our example, we assume that positive news framing, promoting a successful referendum outcome, is perceived as a risk by opponents of the referendum proposal, which in turn induces higher turnout rates.

However, we expect the reversed mobilization dynamic we describe to be contingent upon existing levels of motivation. Only when individuals engage in a process of motivated information processing we can expect them to resist messages inconsistent with extant opinions and to arrive at more polarized attitudes in favor of existing preferences (see, e.g., Meffert et al., 2006). Furthermore, negative attitudes are more likely to mobilize individuals in an election when levels of motivation are high (see, e.g., Hastings et al., 2007). Thus, negativity does not per se mobilize but rather this mobilization should be expected to occur primarily among motivated voters.

Bandura (1997) argues that self-efficacy is crucial in inducing coping behavior in response to a situation that is perceived as deficient and in motivating individuals to become active. Importantly, for individuals who are confronted with a potential threat, their self-assessed efficacy must outweigh the perceived threat in order for them to become mobilized (Witte, 1992). As Rimal and Real (2003) pointed out, risk perception only then results in mobilizing individuals rather than turning them off, when personal efficacy beliefs are strong. Those who feel efficacious are likely to conceive of potential risks as challenges that need to be overcome and show a “responsive” attitude with regard to their subsequent behavior. When individuals feel inefficacious, it is less likely for them to become mobilized in response to a perceived risk (see e.g., Maibach & Murphy, 1995; Witte & Allen, 2000).

On the basis of previous research, we expect that political efficacy moderates the mobilizing effect of positive news framing on opponents of a referendum proposal. Whereas opponents with low efficacy are unlikely to become mobilized by positive news framing and because of higher risk perception, we expect opponents with high efficacy to become more mobilized.

**Research hypothesis**

In this study, we expect risk perception to mediate the effect of positive news framing on turnout intention. As suggested by Tao and Bucy (2007), we test a mediation model to study the impact of media stimuli via a mediator (defined in terms of psychological states such as perceptions, evaluations, or emotions elicited by media stimuli) on a dependent variable in order to get a more adequate account of media influence. Also Preacher and Hayes (2008b), as well as Bizer and Petty (2005), point to the benefits of assessing mediation dynamics in order to study underlying processes and mechanisms behind media and/or framing effects.

We expect the mediation dynamic we described to be strongest among those opposing the referendum proposal and with stronger self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, we hypothesize a “double conditional indirect effect” of positive news framing on turnout intention via risk perception which depends upon existing levels of EU skepticism.
and efficacy. Opponents of the referendum proposal with high levels of efficacy should be more likely to become mobilized to turn out and vote via the route we suggest than opponents with low levels of efficacy or supporters of the referendum proposal. This dynamic is expressed in our central hypothesis:

**H:** Positive news framing of a referendum proposal increases risk perception among those with stronger levels of opposition towards the proposal and higher levels of efficacy. Risk perception, in turn, increases turnout intention the more, the more opposed respondents are against the proposal.

**Method**

To test the effect of positive news framing on the mobilization of referendum opponents and in order to explain the underlying mechanism of such a dynamic we conducted an experiment. We investigate how news framing affects risk perception which in turn we expect to affect the intention to turn out. In line with our theoretical considerations outlined above, we expect this mediation dynamic to be conditional upon existing levels of opposition toward the referendum proposal as well as existing levels of efficacy and to be strongest among those who feel more opposed and more efficacious.

**Experiment**

**Design**

We used a single-factor, posttest only, between-subjects experimental design with random assignment to one of two conditions. The first condition represents a positively framed news story about the EU Treaty of Lisbon and the second condition represents a negatively framed news story.

**Procedure**

The experiment was conducted in January 2008 by The Dutch Institute for Public Opinion Research and Market Research TNS NIPO (Amsterdam/the Netherlands). Participants first completed a pretest questionnaire asking for demographic details and a number of political predispositions such as attitudes toward the EU and political efficacy. Next, participants were exposed to a news article establishing the two different experimental conditions. Finally, participants completed a posttest questionnaire which included measures of our dependent variable (turnout intention) and our mediator (risk perception).

**Sample**

A random sample was drawn from the TNS NIPObase, a database consisting of 200,000 citizens, which is representative of the Dutch adult population according to Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) census data. Importantly, whereas interviews with respondents are conducted online (CASI), the mode of recruitment into the original database is mixed as to prevent an online bias in the sample. Respondents
who do not have an own personal home computer are provided with the necessary technical devices and trained in their use by the survey company in order to allow for their participation. Moreover, we note that high speed Internet penetration in the Netherlands is 86% which reduces potential bias of web-based interviewing. The experiment we report on was one in a series of other experiments and the response rate (72.7%) refers to the overall response rate of those initially contacted and invited to participate in the study. Respondents were randomly assigned to the different experiments and experimental conditions. In total, 470 individuals participated in the experiment that is subject to this study, 249 in the positive condition and 221 in the negative condition (52.6% percent females, age = 18–88 \(M = 47.04, SD = 16.48\))

**Stimulus material**
The experimental stimulus material consisted of a news article with either positive or negative framing of the Treaty of Lisbon. The news articles were produced for the study rather than selected. This gives full control over the experimental manipulation, and it ensures that no respondent has been exposed to the article in advance. In both versions, the storyline was identical, dealing with a general discussion of the assumed consequences of the EU Treaty of Lisbon, framed in either positive or negative terms (stimulus material available from authors upon request). Combining an identical core section with factual information and sections establishing alternative frames has been common practice in previous experimental framing analyses (e.g., Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997).

**Manipulation checks**
A manipulation check question asked respondents if the article they had just read was either more negative or more positive in tone toward the EU Treaty of Lisbon (1 very negative, 7 very positive) and revealed successful manipulation. Respondents in the positive condition \((M = 4.81, SD = 1.56)\) perceived the valence of the article as significantly more positive toward the EU Treaty of Lisbon than respondents in the negative condition \((M = 3.02, SD = 1.22)\), \(t(468) = 13.76, p < .001\).

Our hypothesis assumes that individuals with higher levels of skepticism toward the EU get mobilized against a referendum proposal because they perceive positive framing as negative from their own personal point of view, which we assume to induce greater risk perception. Thus, we conducted a second manipulation check asking respondents if they personally perceived the contents of the news article as either positive or negative from their own personal point of view on a 7-point scale (1 very negative, 7 very positive). In line with our expectations, respondents in the positive condition who felt more skeptical toward the EU did, in fact, perceive the positive stimulus as significantly more negative than those feeling more supportive toward the EU and thus there was a significant interaction between the experimental condition (0 negative, 1 positive) and EU skepticism (1 low, 5 high), \(\beta = -1.99, t(466) = -12.11, p < .001, F(3,466) = 68.14, p < .001\).
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**Dependent variable**

*Turnout intention*

Respondents were asked on a 7-point scale how likely it was that they would go and vote if a referendum were to be held on the EU Treaty of Lisbon (1 very unlikely, 7 very likely) ($M = 4.99, SD = 2.18$).

**Moderating variables**

*EU support*

The degree to which each respondent supports or opposes the EU was assessed with a preintervention measure with four questions on 5-point Likert scales covering the following dimensions: (a) general EU support, (b) support for the Euro, (c) support for EU enlargement, and (d) support for Dutch EU membership. All four items together form a reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$) on which higher scores represent higher levels of EU skepticism ($M = 3.02, SD = .77$).

*Political efficacy*

Political efficacy was measured as a preintervention measure with one standard item on a 5-point scale on which higher scores represent higher levels of efficacy, stating: “People like me have no influence on political decisions taken by the EU” (1 fully agree, 5 fully disagree) ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.04$).

**Mediating variable**

*Risk perception*

Our concept of risk perception combines two different dimensions, first, respondents’ perception of the severity of a risk as well as, second, their perceived susceptibility to it (see e.g., Maddux & Maibach, 1983; Rimal & Real, 2003; Witte, 1992). We asked respondents two questions on 5-point Likert scales on which higher scores represent higher levels of risk perception. First, we asked how much respondents were afraid of the consequences of the Treaty of Lisbon ($M = 2.97, SD = .96$) and secondly, we asked how worried respondents were that EU integration would pose a threat for the Netherlands ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.05$). Both items together form a reliable scale ($r = .73$; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$) ($M = 3.04, SD = .94$).

**Results**

We turn to our mediation analysis and test our hypothesis that positive news framing has the potential to mobilize parts of the electorate via increased risk perception. Therefore, we test risk perception as a mediator for the effect of positive framing on turnout intention.

Early accounts of assessing mediation dynamics have been largely based on the “causal-steps approach” introduced by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to this approach, mediation occurs under the condition that (a) there is a significant main effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable when the presumed
mediating variable is not controlled for, (b) the independent variable has a significant effect on the mediator variable, and (c) the mediator variable has a significant effect on the dependent variable while at the same time the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is controlled for and decreases compared to the direct main effect.

However, more recent research has pointed to the shortcomings of the causal-steps approach as lacking in power and suffering from high Type II error rates (e.g., MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). Thus, in line with recent calls for more formal tests of the significance of specific indirect effects in mediation analyses, we apply bootstrapping as a method to assess indirect effects as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008a).10

Preacher and Hayes (2004) recommend the use of bootstrapping techniques, a nonparametric resampling procedure, when formally assessing mediation as the most powerful and reasonable method to obtain confidence limits for specific indirect effects (see also Shrout & Bolger, 2002; Williams & MacKinnon, 2008).11 Applying this method to our study context, we formally assess if the effect of positive framing on turnout intention is mediated by risk perception. Furthermore, we expect this mediation dynamic to be moderated by both EU skepticism and efficacy and thus be of conditional nature. Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) have developed a method to assess whether an indirect effect varies as a function of a moderator. Building upon this method enables us to estimate conditional indirect effects for specific values of our two moderators, yielding greater statistical power in comparison to other approaches. In the following analysis, we test for a “double conditional indirect effect” in which the path from the independent variable to the mediator (path a1) is moderated by EU skepticism and efficacy and the path from the mediator to the dependent variable (path b1) is moderated by EU skepticism. Figure 1 illustrates our theoretical model, which assumes that positive framing has an effect on turnout intention which is mediated by risk perception and depends on existing levels of EU skepticism and efficacy.

In general, moderated mediation models such as the one introduced above attempt to explain both how and under what conditions a given effect occurs (see Frone, 1999). Formally, we can speak of moderated mediation when the strength of an indirect effect depends on the level of one or more moderators (Preacher et al., 2007).12 Figure 2 illustrates our mathematical model to formally assess “double conditional indirect effects” which builds on one of the models (Model 5) described in the study by Preacher et al. (2007).13

Bootstrapping as an estimation strategy often improves power of a model as it accurately gauges the empirical sampling distribution of the test statistic (see MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).14 Preacher et al. (2007) recommend bootstrap confidence intervals as the most powerful method to assess the significance of conditional indirect effects. Applying this method to our study context, we can generate 95% bias corrected confidence intervals (95% bc CI) for conditional indirect effects at specific values of both moderators. On the basis of 5,000 bootstrap samples, a 95% bias corrected confidence interval (95% bc CI) was
Figure 1 Moderated mediation model to estimate the “double conditional indirect effect” of positive news framing on turnout intention depending on levels of EU skepticism and political efficacy.

Note: This model is based on Model 5 in Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), but with the addition of Z as a moderator of the moderation of X’s effects on M by W.

computed for the point estimate of the specific “double conditional specific indirect effect” at different values for both moderators. If this interval does not include zero, the effect significantly differs from zero in a standard two-tailed test.

We build on an extension of the macro developed by Preacher et al. (2007) and provide estimates for the “double conditional indirect effect” of positive news framing on turnout intention via risk perception at specific values of both moderators. Therefore, we report specific indirect effects of positive news framing on turnout intention via risk perception for different combinations of different levels of both moderators, EU skepticism (\(M = 3.02, SD = .77\)) and political efficacy (\(M = 2.34, SD = 1.04\)). More specifically, in Table 1, we report specific “double conditional indirect effects” at the minimum value (minimum), at one standard deviation below the mean (low), at the mean (mean), at one standard deviation above the mean (high), at two standard deviations above the mean (very high) and at the maximum value (maximum) of both moderators (including combinations of these different levels across both moderators).

In our example, the “double conditional indirect effect” of positive news framing on turnout intention through risk perception is significant in a standard two-tailed test for the following combinations of values for both moderators (Table 1): a “high” level of EU skepticism and a “very high” level of efficacy (\(b = .45, SE = .28\)) (95%
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Figure 2 Moderated mediation model to estimate ‘double conditional indirect effect’ of X on Y depending on W and Z.

Note: This model is based on Model 5 in Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), but with the addition of Z as a moderator of the moderation of X’s effects on M by W.

bc CI: .017; 1.151); a “very high” level of EU skepticism and a “high” level of efficacy ($b = .70, SE = .46$) (95% bc CI: .011; 1.189); a “very high” level of EU skepticism and a “very high” level of efficacy ($b = 1.26, SE = .67$) (95% bc CI: .084; 2.673); and at the “maximum” level of both EU skepticism and efficacy ($b = 2.33, SE = 1.25$) (95% bc CI: .215; 5.115). The conditionality of this “double conditional indirect effect” is demonstrated by the fact that there is no significant indirect effect at lower levels of EU skepticism and efficacy. Thus, supporting our central hypothesis, we can conclude that the mediation dynamic we describe does not occur among individuals with low or average levels of EU skepticism and efficacy, but only among individuals with comparably higher levels of both EU skepticism and efficacy.

Discussion

This article investigated how positive news framing can mobilize individuals opposing a referendum proposal to turn out to vote. We show that positive news framing, endorsing a referendum proposal, can account for higher risk perception regarding the issue at stake, which in turn can mobilize opponents to turn out and vote as a means to prevent the proposal from being implemented. This “reversed mobilization” effect is contingent upon existing levels of efficacy in such a way that it is strongest among those most opposed to the proposal and feeling most efficacious.
**Table 1** “Double Conditional Indirect Effect” of Positive News Framing on Turnout Intention Via Risk Perception at Specific Levels of EU Skepticism (W) and Efficacy (Z)

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<th>Efficacy (Z)</th>
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<td>MAX</td>
<td>MAX</td>
<td>2.331</td>
<td>1.251</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>5.115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Coefficients represent specific indirect effects and standard errors at different values of both moderators, W (EU skepticism) and Z (efficacy), and lower and upper bound of 95% BC bootstrap confidence interval for that effect using 5,000 bootstrap samples. MIN signifies minimum values on the original scale as present in the sample; LOW signifies values at one standard deviation below the mean; MEAN signifies values at the mean; HIGH signifies values at one standard deviation above the mean; VERY HIGH signifies values at two standard deviations above the mean; and MAX signifies maximum values on the original scale as present in the sample. Political efficacy: 1.00 (minimum), 1.30 (low), 2.34 (medium), 3.38 (high), 4.42 (very high), 5.00 (maximum); EU skepticism: 1.25 (minimum), 2.25 (low), 3.02 (medium), 3.79 (high), 4.56 (very high), 5.00 (maximum).

Previous research on electoral mobilization has pointed to the importance of considering the way campaign messages are perceived in order to better understand the psychological processes that account for the mobilization of parts of the electorate (e.g., Martin, 2008; Sigelman & Kugler, 2002). We argue that the way campaign messages are understood systematically depends on existing opinions and outcome preferences. This implies that the reversed mobilization dynamic we describe in our study is more likely to occur in salient electoral contexts in which individuals hold rather strong opinions on the issue(s) at stake. In such a context, news framing has less of a persuasive impact and can instead lead individuals to resist campaign messages and process them in a way that further polarizes existing opinions (e.g., Bizer & Petty, 2005; Meffert et al., 2006).
This form of frame resistance and reversed mobilization is evidently based upon a process of motivated information processing which makes it necessary to ask under which conditions individuals engage in such motivated reasoning and which personal characteristics condition the reversed mobilization effect. Based on extant research, we identified self-efficacy as a moderator of the dynamic we investigated. Only when efficacy beliefs are strong and individuals feel that there is something they can do in order to prevent or change an unwanted scenario, it is likely that they take initiative (e.g., Bandura, 1997, Rimal & Real, 2003; Witte, 1992). However, our investigation into potential moderators is not meant to be exclusive and there might be other possible moderators as well, such as sophistication (see e.g., Meffert et al., 2006) or other factors tapping individual motivation (see e.g., Hastings et al., 2007).

This study not only investigates the factors that moderate the reversed mobilization dynamic, but it also formally assesses the underlying mechanism that accounts for this effect. Previous research has called for the application of more formal mediation tests in media effect and framing research (Bizer & Petty, 2005; Preacher & Hayes, 2008b; Tao & Bucy, 2007) and research on electoral mobilization also stresses the need for more thorough investigations of the underlying processes behind campaign effects (Martin, 2004, 2008; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). We not only show that opponents of a referendum proposal become mobilized in response to positive news framing, but also demonstrate how they do so. In line with existing research on message framing effects in health communication (e.g., Schneider et al., 2001), we show that framing has the potential to increase risk perception among parts of the electorate. Higher risk perception, in turn, affects subsequent behavioral intentions, namely the intention to turn out and vote in a possible referendum in order to prevent an unwanted scenario. Thus, risk perception mediates the effect of positive framing on turnout intention and it is the negative perception of positive framing among referendum opponents that explains the reversed nature of this effect.

In this study, we focus on the reversed mobilization of opponents of a proposal by positive news framing. Of course, a reversed mobilization effect may also occur with regard to the mobilization of supporters by negative news framing and we believe the underlying dynamics to be the same. However, to what extent one or the other is likely to occur is dependent on the respective election context. In a referendum, for example, the potential costs associated with a referendum outcome opposed by an individual are usually greater for opponents than for supporters of the proposal (e.g., Christin et al., 2002; Kirchgässner & Schulz, 2005), making it more likely for opponents to become mobilized. This can be different in certain referendums in which the costs associated with a negative outcome are considerable (e.g., a member state exiting the EU), such as in the second Maastricht referendum in Denmark (1993) or in the second Nice (2007) and Lisbon (2009) referenda. However, the effect of positive framing on skeptics is empirically less explored and theoretically most relevant. In a recent study, we identified the reversed mobilization effect in a “real-world” referendum campaign (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009) and in the current study we explicate the underlying dynamics behind this effect.
With regard to our mediation analysis, it is important to stress what mediation can and cannot mean. Mediation models are merely theoretical models that cannot claim to be complete or exhaustive. As with any theoretical model, they do not prove some definite truth but rather serve as an illustration of thought which remains open to change or extension in light of future insights (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008a). Furthermore, there are limitations with regard to causal inference in mediation models, that is, the nature of the relationship between variables included in such models, which stress the need to be cautious about causal interpretations of model parameters. Causal inference in statistical mediation analysis is an increasingly popular area of methodological research (see e.g., Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010). Alternative experimental approaches to testing mediation hypotheses, involving the experimental manipulation of mediators (i.e., manipulating one mediator without manipulating others), have been developed and proposed that aim to strengthen causal inference in mediation analysis, that is to reduce bias in the point estimation of causal effects (see Bullock & Ha, 2010 for a good discussion). Even though it is not the primary focus of the present study and we regard the current debate about how to best test for mediation as not settled at this point (see e.g., Kenny, 2008), it is important not to overstate the implications of our findings. Especially given the fact that our study is the first to demonstrate the underlying mechanism behind risk-induced electoral mobilization in response to media framing, future research will have to validate and further substantiate our findings, experimentally as well as in real-world settings, and attempt to identify and empirically test other potential mediators. With regard to the issue of causal inference pointed to above, this implies the need to also consider mediators other than the one(s) being tested, as their omission can result in biased estimates of indirect effects, and to design studies that include experimental manipulation of both treatments and mediators.

In line with recent framing research (Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Gross, 2008; Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004; Slothuus, 2008), we regard research into the mediating role of different types of emotions as a potentially promising path in order to shed further light on the underlying psychology behind framing effects. Importantly, future research also has to distinguish between the impact of different kinds of emotions such as, for example, fear and anger, on subsequent judgments and behavior (see e.g., Brader, 2006; Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

We acknowledge certain limitations of our study. First of all, we measured self-reported turnout intention and not actual turnout. However, this has been done in previous experimental research on campaign effects and voter mobilization (see e.g., Min 2004) and we have provided a real-world example for a reversed mobilization dynamic in a recent study (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). For this study, the context was still realistic although no actual referendum took place: The Treaty of Lisbon had just been signed and still needed to be approved by all EU member states and at least one country, Ireland, did hold a referendum on the issue whereas other countries had held referendums on the former EU Constitutional draft which preceded the Treaty of Lisbon. Another limitation of our study is that we do not have the opportunity...
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to compare pre- and postintervention measures in our experiment and thus we are comparing between-group differences rather than actual change within our groups. This implies that we have to be cautious about the interpretation of our findings and further research is needed to substantiate our claim regarding the mobilization of respondents. However, in our present design we deliberately employed a randomized posttest-only design because we were interested in between-group differences and in order to avoid pretest sensitization (see e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our study makes an important methodological and theoretical contribution. It picks up on recent calls to apply a mediation approach to study media effects more adequately (Tao & Bucy, 2007) and assesses the presence of conditional indirect effects applying bootstrapping as a method as recommended by most recent methodological research (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008a, 2008b). Our study integrates theoretical perspectives from different research domains and provides a theoretical framework as well as empirical support for a reversed mobilization dynamic in which positive news framing can mobilize opponents of a referendum proposal. These findings are of relevance for the increasing amount of political communication research interested in uncovering the underlying mechanisms and the psychology behind framing effects and provide a novel perspective for research into electoral mobilization and media-induced campaign effects. Finally, they carry important implications for researchers, journalists, and campaign practitioners, namely that not all media and campaign communication can be expected to have the intended or assumed effect; rather, under certain circumstances, it can contribute to the exact opposite outcome.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions regarding this paper. Furthermore, the authors are grateful to Andrew Hayes for his help in providing a tool to formally assess “double conditional indirect effects.” The data collection for this study was financed by the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO).

Notes

1 In some referendums, the costs of a No vote can be considerable as well and maintaining the status quo can have serious consequences (see e.g., Hobolt, 2006). In the context of EU integration, for example, a negative referendum outcome could in some instances result in unwanted change for supporters of the proposal (i.e., ones’ country having to exit the EU). Thus, the specific referendum context has to be taken into account when assessing the potential risks associated with a referendum outcome and its implications for the mobilization of parts of the electorate.

2 EU referendums are typically classified as “second-order” national elections with low salience attached to them in the perception of voters. However, recent referendums on the EU Constitution yielded high turnout rates and sparked intense public debate in the
media (e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2008) and previous research has suggested that the importance attached to issue considerations can indeed be high in some referendums (e.g., Hobolt, 2005).

3 Research on the impact of negative moods on information processing also showed how people who experience negative moods spend more time processing and evaluating messages (e.g., Baron, Logan, Lilly, Inman, & Brennan, 1994).

4 Similarly, Turner (2006) distinguishes between individuals with low and high levels of self-efficacy in her anger activism model. The model assumes that engagement in higher commitment behaviors and systematic information processing in response to anger inducing messages is most likely for individuals holding high efficacy beliefs. Individuals with low levels of self-efficacy are unlikely to engage in behaviors because it seems unlikely to them that their behavior will facilitate change.

5 Experimental research in health communication often assesses the effect of message framing on subsequent behavioral intentions in order to test for mobilization patterns (e.g., Rimal & Real, 2003). Also within political communication, previous research has employed laboratory experiments to test the effect of campaign news on turnout intention in order to assess the mobilizing potential of differently framed messages (e.g., Min, 2004).

6 Our initial design contained a second factor in which we varied the style of reporting (tabloid vs. broadsheet). As this factor did not have an impact on the variables of interest to this study, we do not distinguish between the two factors in the analyses presented here.

7 To assure external validity, the content of both versions of the stimulus article mirrors a realistic and factual discussion of the assumed consequences of the Treaty of Lisbon framed in either positive or negative terms.

8 Subsequent result is based on a regression model with experimental condition (coded as 0 negative condition, 1 positive condition), EU skepticism (1 low, 5 high) and the interaction term between experimental condition and EU skepticism as independent variables.

9 A randomization check revealed successful randomization with no between-group differences with regard to age, gender, and education. The treatment groups did also not differ for our preintervention measures of EU support or political efficacy. The random selection of subjects means that there are no ex ante differences between groups (within sampling variability). Thus, between-group differences constitute evidence that subjects responded differently to the respective experimental interventions.

10 The same authors have also warned of the routine use of the most commonly applied formal mediation test, the Sobel test or product-of-coefficients approach (Sobel, 1986), as this test is only suitable for large sample sizes. For smaller samples, the assumption of multivariate normality, which the Sobel test is based upon, is usually violated, that is the assumption that the sampling distribution of the total and specific indirect effects is normal.

11 Bootstrapping implies that each indirect effect is estimated multiple times by repeatedly sampling cases with replacement from the data and estimating the model in each resample.

12 We acknowledge the existence of different views regarding the distinction between “moderated mediation” and “mediated moderation” (see Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt,
2005). Although not the key focus of this study, we believe a distinction needs to be made between mathematical equivalence or difference and the interpretive focus when looking at moderated mediation and/or mediated moderation. The label one gives to such models does depend on one’s interpretative focus. It is a moderated mediation model if one focuses on conditional indirect effects and it is a mediated moderation model if one focuses on the indirect effect of a product through a proposed mediator. Thus, there can be a reliance on the same analytic models and both imply conditional indirect effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable. We are not claiming that both processes are identical in every possible way or that the terms should be used interchangeably, however, as Muller et al. (2005) also point to, if one allows for the possibility of moderated mediation in cases where there is overall moderation of the treatment effect, then the distinction between the two processes becomes more a matter of theoretical preference than anything else and both processes represent two sides of the same coin.

We are grateful to Andrew Hayes for providing us with the necessary tool to formally assess such “double conditional indirect effects.”

Given the limitations associated with standard normal-theory tests of indirect effects that we referred to earlier (i.e., assuming normality of the sampling distribution of the conditional indirect effect).

Testing this model, the conditional effect of positive news framing on risk perception is assessed by means of an interaction term between the experimental condition, EU skepticism, and efficacy. The conditional effect of risk perception on turnout intention is assessed with an interaction term between risk perception and EU skepticism.

Political efficacy: 1.00 (minimum), 1.30 (low), 2.34 (medium), 3.38 (high), 4.42 (very high), 5.00 (maximum); EU skepticism: 1.25 (minimum), 2.25 (low), 3.02 (medium), 3.79 (high), 4.56 (very high), 5.00 (maximum).

References


좋은 뉴스가 나쁜 뉴스일때는 언제인가:
역동원효과뒤의 중재역학의 이해

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요약

본 연구는 국민투표 제안의 반대자들을 대상으로 긍정적인 뉴스 프레임의 동원 잠재성을 연구한 것이다. 470 명을 대상으로 한 실험에서 부츠트레핑을 상황적 간접효과들을 평가하기 위한 방법으로 사용했으며, 중재분석 결과, EU 통합에 관한 국민투표 제안을 지지하는 긍정적인 뉴스 프레임은 반대자들에 의해 부정적으로 인지되었다. 이러한 역동원효과는 현존하는 자기효과성의 수준에 따라 달라질 수 있는 것으로, EU에 대해 회의적인 수준이 클수록, 그리고 자기효과성확신이 클수록 강하게 나타나는 위험인지 대투표를 하고자 하는 의도에 대한 긍정적인 뉴스 프레임의 이중 상황적 간접효과의 증거를 산출하는 것이다.
Quand les bonnes nouvelles sont mauvaises : une explication de la dynamique de médiation modérée à l’origine de l’effet de mobilisation inversé
Andreas R.T. Schuck & Claes H. de Vreese

Cette étude explore le potentiel mobilisateur du cadrage positif de nouvelles sur les opposants à une proposition de référendum. À partir d’une expérience (N=470), en utilisant l’autoamorçage (bootstrap) comme méthode d’évaluation des effets indirects conditionnels, une analyse de médiation a montré que le cadrage positif de nouvelles (l’appui à une proposition de référendum sur l’intégration européenne) était perçu comme étant négatif par les opposants et qu’il mobilisait ceux qui démontraient les plus hauts degrés de scepticisme envers l’UE à aller voter en raison d’une plus forte perception de risque. Cet effet de « mobilisation inversée » dépendait des degrés actuels d’autoefficacité, ce qui indique un « effet indirect conditionnel double » du cadrage positif des nouvelles sur l’intention de participation par le biais de la perception de risques. Cet effet était le plus fort chez ceux qui démontraient les plus hauts degrés de scepticisme envers l’UE ainsi que les plus forts sentiments d’autoefficacité.

Mots clés : cadrage de nouvelles, mobilisation électorale, effets de campagne, perception des risques, médiation modérée, référendum, scepticisme envers l’UE
Wenn gute Nachrichten schlechte Nachrichten sind: Die Explikation einer Dynamik der moderierten Mediation beim umgekehrten Mobilisierungseffekt

Die Studie untersucht das Mobilisierungspotential von *positivem* Nachrichten-Framing auf die Gegner von Referendum-Anträgen. Basierend auf einem Experiment (N=470) mit Bootstrapping als Methode zur Erfassung konditionaler indirekter Effekte, zeigt eine Mediationsanalyse, dass positives Nachrichten-Framing, also die Befürwortung eines Referendumantrags zur EU-Integration, durch die Gegner negativ aufgenommen wurde und Personen mit höherem Skeptizismus gegenüber der EU aufgrund einer erhöhten Risikowahrnehmung dazu anregte, aktiv zu werden und wählen zu gehen. Dieser „umgekehrte Mobilitätseffekt“ verteilt sich zufällig über verschiedene Ausprägungen von Selbstwirksamkeitserwartung, was hindeutet auf einen „*doppelten* konditionalen indirekten Effekt“ von positivem Nachrichten-Framing auf die Intention aktiv zu werden über die Risikowahrnehmung, die bei denjenigen am stärksten war, die einen stärkeren EU-Skeptizismus wie auch höhere Selbstwirksamkeit zeigten.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Nachrichtenframing, Mobilisierung der Wählerschaft, Kampagneneffekte, Risikowahrnehmung, moderierte Mediation, Referendum, EU-Skeptizmus