

**Tuning in and Turning Out:  
An assessment of the relationship between media  
exposure and electoral participation among  
Americans ages 18 to 24**

Maggie Chaitman  
PS 115: Final Paper  
December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Maggie Chaitman  
PS 115: Final Paper  
December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

**Tuning in and Turning Out:  
An assessment of the relationship between media exposure and electoral  
participation among Americans ages 18 to 24**

**Media Exposure and Voter Turnout among American Youth**

In 2004, electoral participation among young people reached its highest level in a decade. Even in 2004, however, only 47% of Americans aged 18 to 24 turned out to vote (Lopez, Kirby, Sagoff, 2). In every presidential election since 1972, when 18 to 21 year olds first gained the right to vote, voters under the age of 25 have had significantly lower voter turnout than their 25+ year old counterparts (Lopez, Kirby, Sagoff, 2). The difference in voter turnout between these two groups has ranged between 16 and 28 percentage points over the last three decades (Pew). Just as youth electoral participation is significantly lower than adult and elderly electoral participation, youth exposure to news media is significantly lower than adult and elderly exposure to news media as well.

Martin P. Wattenberg aggregated data from U.S. National Election Studies conducted between 1948 and 2004, which measured whether or not Americans of various ages were aware of major news stories that occurred during election season. Wattenberg found that while the elderly used to be the least likely age group to follow major news stories of election years, today it is young people who are the least likely to follow such news stories. (Wattenberg, 63-64). The assertion that young people today do not engage with news media to nearly the same extent

as their elders is corroborated by the results of an April 1996 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for The People and The Press. The Pew poll found that while 64% of respondents over 65 reported being regular viewers of the evening news shows on NBC, CBS, or ABC, only 22% of respondents younger than 30 reported being regular viewers (Bennett, 47). The same poll found that Americans under 30 were less likely than respondents over 65 to report regularly watching or listening to TV or radio talk shows where people express political opinions (Bennett, 47).

Considering today's youth's lack of exposure to political news, researchers such as Wattenberg believe that young Americans are notably less informed about politics than older Americans. Despite remarkable increases in public levels of formal education, Wattenberg's hypothesis seems to be correct. Over fifty years worth of American National Election Studies Data shows that people under the age of 30 are consistently less knowledgeable than the elderly about basic civics, current political leaders, presidential candidates, and Congress (Wattenberg, 79). This lack of political knowledge may be directly related to low voter turnout.

According to researchers such as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, political knowledge yields political participation. Carpini and Keeter believe that staying informed about public affairs "helps citizens to identify what policies would truly benefit them and to incorporate this information in to their voting behavior" and "promotes active participation in politics" (Wattenberg, 90). Media Mobilization theory, which hinges on Carpini and Keeter's belief in the power of political information, maintains that news media educates viewers about politics, which in turn increases their sense of efficacy and encourages political participation (Newton, 582). If media mobilization theory is correct, the low levels of exposure to news

among Americans aged 18-24 may be at least partially responsible for their low levels of electoral participation.

While the corresponding low levels of youth news exposure and youth voter turnout superficially seem to suggest that media mobilization theory may be correct, significant research from the United Kingdom has produced a theory to the contrary: that the low levels of media consumption among youth might actually lead to increased political engagement rather than disengagement. This theory, called Media Malaise theory, is founded in the belief that exposure to modern mass media creates political apathy, alienation, cynicism, and a reduced sense of efficacy (Newton, 577). Media Malaise theorists believe that the continual search for bigger audience causes news sources to focus disproportionately on news about tragedy, corruption, conflict and scandal and to practice “attack journalism”, which encourages politicians to highlight their opponents’ weaknesses rather than positively representing their own strengths (Newton, 577-578). Constant exposure to negative news creates “a pervasive sense of cynicism, distrust and suspicion of modern politics and politicians” (Newton, 578). Moreover, as news sources relentlessly scramble to increase their audiences and beat out their competitors, news items are constantly replaced with the next breaking story, so that events are covered briefly and superficially. The result is a “fast forward effect” which creates “political confusion, fatigue, alienation, and distrust among the many citizens who lack the information, understanding and motivation to make sense of the news” (Newton, 578). If Media Malaise theory is sound, then while the youth population as a whole has low voter turnout, those young people that are exposed to the media are more likely to vote than those who are not exposed.

This study takes a first step towards determining whether exposure to the news is having a positive effect on youth voting through media mobilization or a negative effect through media

malaise. My hope is to identify a correlation between exposure to news media and likelihood to vote in the 2008 presidential election, which will act as a crucial precursor to determining whether there is a causal relationship due to either Media Mobilization or Media Malaise.

While determining causation will require further research beyond my study to eliminate the possibility that other variables beyond the news are responsible for motivating or discouraging youth voting, the identification of a significant correlation will be valuable in its own right. A positive correlation will signify that communicating with youth via the news sources they are exposed to is a strategic way of accessing young voters. If a positive correlation is identified, one application of the finding will be that political candidates should run campaign advertisements targeted at 18 to 24 year old voters in the news sources that young people watch.

### **Hypothesis**

I hypothesize that young Americans (18-24) who are exposed to news media are more likely to vote in the 2008 presidential election than young Americans who are not exposed to news media. There are two reasons why I expect a positive correlation between engaging with news media and voting. First, those young people that read, watch, or listen to the news are likely to vote because they choose to devote free time to increasing their knowledge of politics and current events on a regular basis. Therefore, they are probably more likely to devote free time to participating in an election which affects such politics and current events. This reason would create a correlation, even if there is no causation. Second, I believe that watching the news

does increase viewers' political knowledge, regardless of whether this knowledge is positive or negative, and regardless of whether this knowledge is completely accurate or sensationalized. No matter the type of information gained, educated viewers gain a sense of efficacy and the motivation to vote in order to influence those issues which they are informed about. If this assumption is correct, then media exposure and likelihood of voting are not just correlated, but also causally related. Before attempting to understand whether media and voting have a positive causal relationship, however, I must first determine that a significant relationship exists at all.

### **Method**

I worked with my classmates in Kent Portney's "Public Opinion and Survey Research" course at Tufts University to design a survey of American youth entitled "Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People, part 2". Using the online polling services of YouGov/Polimetrix, the survey was disseminated online to a random subsample of 1,000 respondents from the American Community Study conducted by the Bureau of the Census. Any U.S. citizen between 18 and 24 years of age who does not currently serve full-time in the U.S. military was eligible to participate.

Conducting the survey on the internet enabled instantaneous distribution to young people all over the country. The online format allowed for seamless customization when necessary, so that respondents only received those questions that applied to their previous answers. Using an online poll was particularly advantageous given the target age group, as youth are most likely

more accessible via the computer than via telephone or mail, given the internet-savvy nature of the generation.

Despite the advantages of an internet-based survey, the survey did have a few significant disadvantages as well. Using YouGov/Polimetrix's panel of respondents yielded a biased sample in that each member of the population did not have an equal chance of being chosen for the survey. Only people who already were a part of the YouGov/Polimetrix panel were eligible to participate. There is a possibility that certain demographics are more likely to participate in such panels than others, which would yield a biased sample. Because the internet is a fairly new medium for conducting surveys, however, this potential bias is only beginning to be studied. While the survey was not a pure probability sample, YouGov/Polimetrix did employ strategies to ensure a well distributed and fairly representative sample.

993 respondents were invited directly to participate in the study, of which 31.2% completed the survey. The additional 636 interviews were conducted by respondents who were redirected to the study after being screened out from participating in other YouGov/Polimetrix studies. Of eligible redirected respondents, 66.7% completed the survey. These response rates are within an acceptable range for our study and should not have damaged the credibility of the survey data.

The survey sample was stratified such that 500 survey respondents were college students and 500 were non-college students. After stratification, the sample was weighted based on age, race, education, and gender in two ways, in order to represent the characteristics of college and non-college respondents separately, and then to represent the characteristics of the 18-24 year old population as a whole. Based on such weights, it can be assumed that the surveyed panel was a fairly accurate representation of the larger population.

## Hypothesis Testing

I tested my hypothesis by comparing the results of two survey questions: one question which gauged respondents' exposure to news media (the independent variable) and one question which gauged respondents' likelihood of voting in the 2008 presidential election (the dependent variable).

In order to ascertain whether respondents were exposed to news media, I asked respondents whether or not they were aware of a highly publicized news story about the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Respondents were asked, "Now I would like to ask you about something that has been in the news within the last few weeks. Not everyone will have heard about it. Do you recall a news story in the last few weeks about the children's health care program, sometimes called S-CHIP?" Respondents had the option to answer "yes", "no", "don't know/not sure", or they could refuse to answer the question.

Respondents were told that not everyone would have heard about S-CHIP in order to make respondents who were not aware of the news story feel more comfortable admitting so. Asking whether or not respondents recalled a news story was a superior method of determining news media exposure to asking respondents to report how often or for how many hours they watch, read, or listen to the news because it eliminated the possibility that respondents might unintentionally provide inaccurate information due to the difficulty of measuring hours spent watching television, glancing at a newspaper, or tuning into to a news radio show. Especially with television and radio, people often switch back and forth between many channels and might happen to occasionally catch part of the news, yet their TV watching or radio listening is so mundane that they cannot accurately report how often they catch a significant portion of a news

show (Dillman, 68). Asking whether or not respondents had heard of a specific news item measured the actual political knowledge gained from exposure, which is what I was most interested in, rather than time spent exposed to the news.

In order to ascertain whether or not respondents planned to vote in the upcoming election, respondents were asked, “How likely is it that you will vote in the general election for president next year?” Respondents had the choice to answer “Definitely will vote”, “Probably will vote”, “50-50 chance of voting”, “Probably will not vote”, “Definitely will not vote”, or “Don’t know, not sure”. There is the possibility that people reported being more likely to vote than they realistically are because they perceive a stigma against admitting that they do not plan to vote. Providing answer options on a Likert scale increased the accuracy of answers by providing a balanced array of options across the spectrum of likelihood. While including a “don’t know, not sure” option might have encouraged guilty-feeling respondents who don’t plan to vote to report being undecided, putting the “don’t know, not sure” option at the end of the scale provided “less of an invitation to avoid a directional response” than putting the “undecided” option in the middle of the scale (Dillman, 60). Under the assumption that most people who reported planning to vote when they do not actually plan to chose an answer option in the middle of the Likert scale, I focused only on those people who indicate a definite likelihood of voting and those who indicate a definite likelihood of not voting for my analysis.

I expected the survey results to show that a greater percentage of those youth who recall the S-CHIP story indicated a definite plan to vote in the 2008 presidential election than those youth who do not recall the S-CHIP news story. There are two possible patterns of relations that would refute this hypothesis. The first pattern that would refute my hypothesis would be if the results yield a negative or inverse correlation between exposure to news media and likelihood to

vote in the general election—that is, if a greater percentage of respondents who recall the S-CHIP story have a definite plan not to vote in the general election than those respondents who do not recall the S-CHIP story, and a greater percentage of respondents who do not recall the S-CHIP story have a definite plan to vote in the general election than those respondents who do not recall the S-CHIP story. This pattern could support the theory of Media Malaise, where watching, reading, or listening to the news disillusion youth and discourages electoral participation. A second pattern that would refute my hypothesis would be if the results suggest that there is no significant relationship between youth exposure to news media and likelihood of voting.

## **Results**

The results of my research confirm my hypothesis. 87.5% of respondents who recalled the news story said they will definitely vote in the 2008 presidential election and only 62.4% of respondents who did not recall the news story said that they will definitely vote in the 2008 presidential election. Not only do more respondents who recalled the news story definitely plan to vote than respondents who did not recall the news story, but more respondents who did not recall the news story definitely plan not to vote than respondents who recalled the news story. 7.8% of respondents who did not recall the news story said that they will definitely not vote in the 2008 presidential election and only 1.4% of respondents who did recall the news story said that they will definitely not vote in the 2008 election. These are extremely significant results,

which reflect a very high positive correlation between media exposure and electoral participation among 18 to 24 year old Americans.

		Recall news story		Total
		Yes	No	
Likelihood of voting in 2008 presidential election	<b>Definitely will vote</b>	<b>446</b> <b>87.5%</b>	<b>176</b> <b>62.4%</b>	<b>622</b> <b>78.5%</b>
	Probably will vote	32 6.3%	45 16.0%	77 9.7%
	50-50 chance of voting	20 3.9%	25 8.9%	45 5.7%
	Probably will not vote	5 1.0%	14 5.0%	19 2.4%
	<b>Definitely will not vote</b>	<b>7</b> <b>1.4%</b>	<b>22</b> <b>7.8%</b>	<b>29</b> <b>3.7%</b>
	Total	510 100%	282 100%	792 100.0%

While these results show a very high correlation between the independent and dependent variables, they in no way suggest a causal relationship. Determining causality will require further research to rule out other variables that might encourage those youth that are exposed to news media to vote. According to Mark Hugo Lopez, Research Director at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), young people are more likely to vote if they are college educated, come from families where the parents discussed politics with them, and come from places that have strong civic education programs (Lopez, 3). Caucasians and African-Americans are more likely to vote than Hispanics and as of recent elections, females are more likely to vote than males (Lopez, 5). In order to demonstrate causality, further research must be conducted to show that these other factors are not the true motivators of voting and that media exposure is not simply a coincidental correlation.

### **Conclusion: A Critical Analysis**

The research I conducted using questions from the “Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People, part 2” survey confirmed my hypothesis that a significant positive relationship exists between media exposure and voter turnout among American youth. While I am pleased that my research supports my hypothesis, there are a few things that I would have done differently if I were to execute this survey again. First, I would conduct research using a probability sample, where every unit of the population has an equal chance of being chosen for the survey. Given the difficulties of obtaining a probability sample, however, I am fairly satisfied with the sample from the YouGov/Polimetrix panel, based on the weights applied and

the response rate of respondents. Second, I would prefer to conduct a panel survey with two waves, one before the election and one after the election, in order to actually measure which respondents voted rather than relying on respondents to estimate their likelihood of voting. In an ideal situation, a two wave panel survey with no replacement rate would be the most accurate way to measure voter turnout. Third, to measure news exposure, I would like to ask respondents whether or not they recall various highly publicized news stories instead of only one news story. By asking about only the S-CHIP story, someone with fairly high news exposure who simply did not recall that one story was evaluated as having low news exposure. Nevertheless, since the S-CHIP story was highly publicized, it is fairly unlikely that someone with high news exposure would have missed hearing about it. While logistical barriers did prevent me from implementing the ideal survey, I do believe that my results are significant and that the positive correlation which they identify provides the first step towards further research to determine causation.

### Sources Cited

Bennett, Stephen E. "Why Young Americans Hate Politics, and What We Should Do about It" Political Science and Politics 30:1 (Mar, 1997) 47-53

Department of State. "Youth Voting and the 2004 Election: An Interview with Mark Lopez" Election Focus 2004 1:7 (March 31, 2004): 3-5

Dillman, Don A. Mail and Internet Surveys: 2nd Edition, 2007 Edition. Hoboken: John Wiley, 2007.

Lopez, Mark Hugo, Kirby, Mark Hugo, and Sagoff, Jared. "The Youth Vote 2004" The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) July 2005: 1-15

Newton, Kenneth. "Mass Media Effects: Mobilization or Media Malaise?" British Journal of Political Science 29 (1999) 577-599

"Young Voters and the 2004 Elections: Who They are and What We Know". The Pew Charitable Trusts. 12/11/2007 <[http://www.pewtrusts.org/news\\_room\\_ektid17806.aspx](http://www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_ektid17806.aspx)>.

Wattenberg, Martin P. Is Voting for Young People? New York: Pearson Longman, 2007