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Wüest, Bruno ; Bertsou, Eri

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Other titles: Vicious and virtuous at the same time? Media usage, support for democratic gov- ernance and political efficacy in four Western European countries

Media usage and Gamson's mobilization hypothesis in four Western European countries *

PRELIMINARY DRAFT!

Bruno Wueest[†]   Eri Bertsou[†]

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between media usage and political engagement for citizens, who are neither invested nor supportive to politics. It starts from two fiercely debated conditions in Western Europe. First, it is well-researched that there is a noticeable number of disaffected citizens, who neither support nor show interest in the various institutions of established democracies. Second, there is a widespread notion that political news increasingly focuses on conflict, scandals, personalized stories and sensational events. We adapt Gamson's (1968) mobilization hypothesis and show that media usage is related to more political engagement, especially among democratically disaffected persons.

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Keywords
Trust in politics, political efficacy, mobilization, media usage, political engagement

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Introduction

In the last years, a wide range of events, such as the London riots of 2011 or the many successes of anti-systemic fringe parties throughout Europe, have been interpreted as manifestations of a fundamental crisis of support for democratic governance and stability (Hartleb, 2015). This pessimistic interpretation is reinforced by findings by the existing literature that a noticeable number of citizens are alienated from politics (Doorenspleet, 2012). Given their low levels of political participation, these citizens should therefore be seen as 'disaffected democrats' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002).

However, while it is a well documented fact that citizens express primarily negative orientations towards the actors and institutions that govern them (e.g. Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Norris, 2011), a competing literature highlights the merits of this condition. Growing dissatisfaction is seen as the expression of high expectations and critical outlooks on politics, leading to high levels of electoral and non-electoral participation, and, in consequence, to the improvement of democratic processes and structures (Klingemann, 1999). In essence, this interpretation boils down to Gamson's (1968) theory of political mobilization. According to Gamson, support for democratic institutions interacts with political efficacy, which is the citizen's belief that they can understand and meaningfully impact politics. Combined with high political efficacy, disaffection motivates active participation and thus contributes to a mobilized citizenry. However, when combined with feelings of inefficacy, disaffection leads to alienation and is harmful to the political system. Despite the intuitive merits of this theory it consistently produced unsupporting empirical evidence, pointing to a more complicated interaction between individual attitudes and political engagement (Sigelman and Feldman, 1983).

We maintain that the media is part of this puzzle's resolution. In line with

media mobilization theorists, we assume that media increasingly provide news in an entertaining content, which caters to the large part of the population that that does not pay close attention to politics (Schudson, 1998; Lupia, 1994). Hence, an increase in media consumption actually can be expected to be related to increases in political engagement among the disaffected citizens.

After the elaboration of the theoretical argument, we present novel empirical evidence from a survey conducted in the UK, France, Germany, and Switzerland supporting this hypothesis.

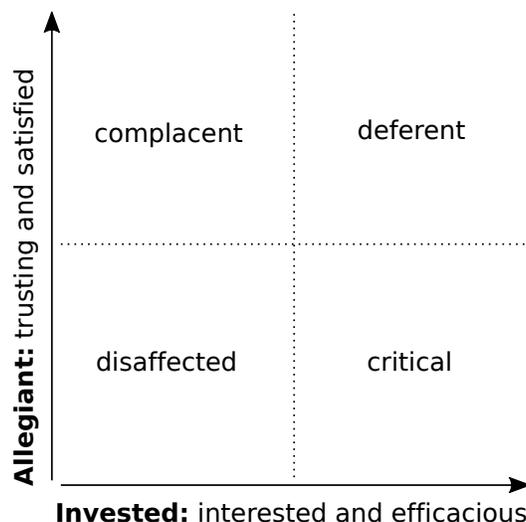## Gamson's mobilization hypothesis and media usage

A growing literature understands the contemporary lack of political support as fundamental threat to democratic governance and stability, more precisely as 'anti-politics' (Jennings and Stoker, ming), 'counter-democracy' (Rosanvallon, 2008), or a 'hollowing out' of democracy (Mair, 2013). Such diagnoses of a crisis of support of democracy usually entail symptoms like declining participation, a growing dissociation between political decision makers and 'ordinary citizens' and a drastic erosion of trust in and satisfaction with democratic institutions. In essence, these diagnoses build on prominent work on the role of political support for the effective governance and legitimacy of democratic regimes. According to Easton (1965), diffuse support is a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy, since it helps citizens to tolerate democratic regimes also in times of poorer performance. Similarly, Verba and Almond (1980) consider a positively oriented citizenry towards the political elite to be conducive to stable democratic governance.

In sharp contrast to the pessimistic point of view, the decline in political support led a second group of scholars to maintain that the decrease in levels of political support stems from an increase in citizens' democratic expectations and

actually is a sign of a positive development (Dalton and Welzel, 2014; Welzel, 2007; Norris, 2011). Accordingly, higher democratic aspirations are seen as necessary for the healthy functioning of political institutions. More suspicious, vigilant and mobilized citizens constitute an ever better counter-weight towards poweful people and institutions (Hardin, 2004). This is most clearly formulated in Gamson's (1968) theory of political mobilisation. Gamson argues that a lack of political support does not necessarily contribute to political alienation, since it depends on a citizen's feeling of political efficacy. The combination of lacking political support and high political efficacy should motivate active participation. However, when combined with feelings of inefficacy, a lack political support leads to disaffection and is a bad sign for the health of the political system.

Taken together, the aforementioned literature points to two distinct dimensions of political support (see Figure 1): *allegiance* in terms of specific support such as trust in government as well as more general support in terms of satisfaction with democracy; and *investedness* in politics, which is the combination of high interest and high political efficacy. Building on recent research on political distrust (Bertsou, 2015), we emphasize the need for a broad and comprehensive specification of both dimensions. More specific trust and more diffuse satsfaction are both integral parts of political allegiance. In a similar vein, political efficacy and interest in politics are essential components of investedness. The two dimensions of support further lead to the differentiation of four stylized persons: A *deferent* person is both satisfied with as well as invested into politics; *Complacent* rather blindly support the democratic regime, since they are neither interested nor effacious in politics; *critical* persons are invested, but they do not trust political institutions and are not satisfied with the way democracy works; *disaffected* persons, finally, are neither invested nor allegiant.

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Figure 1: Dimensions of political support

According to Gamson's mobilization hypothesis, disaffected citizens should be more motivated to engage in political action in order to voice their grievances and alter those processes. However, despite the intuitive merits of this theory, it consistently produced unsupporting or very weak emprical evidence, which points to a more complicated interaction between individual political attitudes (Sigelman and Feldman, 1983; Bertsou, 2015). We maintain that, in today's democracies, media use plays an important role in turning the grievances of disaffected citizens into political participation.

In the literature on the democratic quality of the media, the media's performance is often criticized as flawed (see Esser and Matthes (2013) for a comprehensive overview). The reasons for this diagnosis is twofold. First, media systems are increasingly centralized into a few large media conglomerates, which raises fears that the diversity of viewpoints is diminished and that the independence of media from political or economic players is lost (Champlin and Knoedler, 2006). Second, mass media shape their political news coverage according to the maximum attention of a wide public (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Since only

a small fraction of the population wants detailled, substantive information on politics, political news production focuses more and more on scandals, sensational events and conflict within the political elite (Bennett, 2003). This is taken as evidence that the mass media fail in their democratic function (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006).

Other authors, however, argue against judging media by highly normative expectations on democratic quality, since they have neither the means nor the incentives to do so (Müller, 2015). Since most of the media outlets are run as commercial enterprises, it is rather surprising that they have retained a public-service orientation at all (Graber, 2004). Taking the same line of argument, it is regularly shown that only a very small part of the population is actually interested in becoming the well-informed and eagerly participating citizen democratic theory suggests (Lupia, 1994; Norris, 2000; Semetko and Tworzecki, 2012). Most citizens are satsified with political decisions that are based on selective knowledge and heuristics. Accordingly, a more realistic interpretation of democratic citizenship is that citizens do not need to pay close attention to politics all the time, they only have to follow the news in order to notice when their interests are in danger (Schudson, 2008). And this is actually more likely when the news is presented in an interesting way. Sensationalist media coverage may therefore be more successful in engaging people and changing their minds than the best in-depth political analysis.

This is why we expect that media usage is related to more political engagement, especially among democratically disaffected persons. The dominance of entertaining content in the media whould therefore have redistributional consequences. Invested and allegiant persons are likely to be unaffected or even discouraged to particpate in politics by media consumption, while political engagement and media consumption should be positively related among disaffected

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persons.

Data and Estimation

The data for this study was collected in the context of the Democratic Governance and Citizens Survey conducted in 2015/16 (Democracy, 2016). The survey contains the answers of 4'033 respondents in France, Germany, the UK and Switzerland. Table 3 in the appendix lists the averages, standard deviations and number of missing values for all items used.

As for interest in politics, two items that ask about the interest in the politics of the local authority as well as the respective country are used. Both items are measured on four items from 1 = not at all interested to 4 = very interested. Satisfaction with democracy is asked for the local and the national level as well. Political trust is surveyed concerning the national government and parliament. All these questions are measured on a ten-item scale. The usage of the four most important media channels is asked as follows: How many days in the last week did you read the political content of a newspaper (print or online), watch news on TV, use the Internet (Websites, Social Networks, Blogs, Twitter, etc.) to obtain information about politics and society, and listen to radio news? The scale for every media usage ranges from 0 = never and 1 = less than once a week to 8 = every day.

The dependent variables are constructed as cumulative indices for five different forms conventional political engagement – casting of vote in the last national, local, regional and European parliament election as well as in the last local or national referendum – and four different forms of unconventional political engagement – contacting a politician, government, or government official; signing a petition; participating in a public demonstration; and boycotting certain products.

In addition, the gender, age and educational level (harmonized across countries using the International Standard Classification of Education of the UNESCO) are added as controls to the models presented in the following. Finally, iterative factor weights are added in order to balance disproportionately distributed drop-out rates across countries.

The relationships between political support, media usage and political engagement in the following is explored using a maximum likelihood factor analysis and several linear regression models. In order to keep the different models comparable, each numeric variable is standardized by dividing it by two times its standard deviation (Gelman, 2008).

Results

The analyses start with the establishment of the basic dimensions of political support. Our assumption that the different aspects of trust, satisfaction, interest and efficacy are components of two dimensions is clearly confirmed by the results of the factor analysis as presented in Table 1. The chi square statistic, as well the optimal coordinates, acceleration factor and parallel analysis (results not shown), suggest that a two factor solution is by far the optimal one. The four indicators on trust and satisfaction mainly load in the first factor, while the indicators related to political efficacy and interest are closely linked to the second factor. Only the two indicators related to the local level, satisfaction with and interest in the politics of the local authority, exhibit a rather low but still substantial loading with their factors. Nevertheless, the two factors are clearly shaped. As already mentioned, can be specified as allegiance to and investedness into politics, respectively.

Table 1: Unrotated maximum likelihood factor analysis of trust, satisfaction, interest and efficacy

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Trust in government	0.87	
Trust in parliament	0.92	
Satisfaction with local democracy	0.50	
Satisfaction with national democracy	0.75	
Interest in national politics		0.65
Understanding of politics		0.89
Qualified to participate		0.82
Interest in local politics		0.44
Eigenvalue	2.46	2.12
Cumulative Variance	0.31	0.57
Labels	Allegiant	Invested
Chi square statistic	911.91*** DF=13	

Figure 2 shows the correlation between these two factors, which is non-linear but very weak[1]. In addition, the size of the groups specified in Figure 1 is presented as number of respondents which are above or below average of the two factors. The deferent are the biggest group with a share of 32%. About one third of the respondents are thus supportive to politics and the political insitutions on both aspects. The disaffected citizens, which are neither allegiant nor invested, make for exactly one fourth of all respondents (25%). The two other groups, the critical and complacent citizens, are equal with a share of 22%.

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[1]Note that this is the unrotated solution of the factor analysis.

Figure 2: 4 types of political support
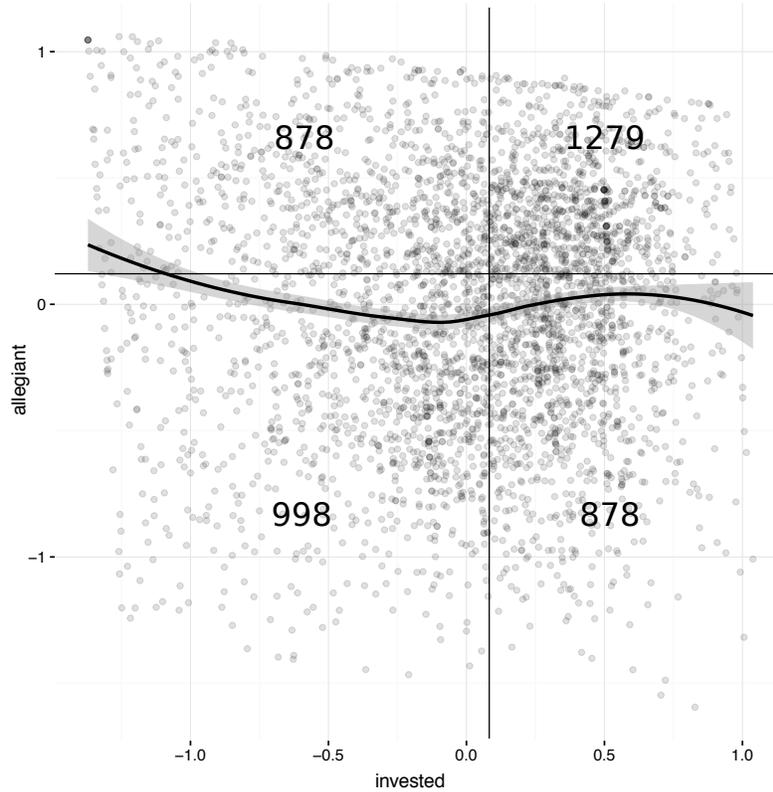
How does media use come into play with regards to these results on political support and political engagement? Since we are primarily intersted in the newspaper, internet, TV and radio use of the disaffected citizens, we show first regression results on the indices for conventional and unconventional participation only for these respondents in Table 2. As for the frequency of TV and newspaper use, the relationship is clearly positive for both conventional and unconventional participation. Hence, disaffected citizens who read about politics in the newspapers and watch TV news more often, are also participating more in elections, votes, boycots, demostrations and petitions. The same holds for radio use and unconventional participation. Of course, no causal interpretation of this result is possible, i.e. it remains an open question whether disaffected

citizens seek more political information in the media because they participate more regularly or vice versa. However, it is clear that political disaffection is less harmful to democracy if people use media to get informed about politics and participate more often. Quite surprisingly in the context of claims that the internet is a 'liberation technology' for people who are traditionally underrepresented in politics (Sloam, 2013; Coleman and Blumler, 2009), internet use is not related to higher political engagment of the politically disaffected.

Table 2: Linear regressions relating media use and political participation for the disaffected

	Conventional participtation			Unconventional participtation		
	Estimate	Std.Err	$Pr(>|t|)$	Estimate	Std.Err	$Pr(>|t|)$
(Intercept)	-0.322	0.286		-0.069	0.194	
TV use	0.214	0.084	*	0.196	0.055	***
gender	0.104	0.085		0.057	0.058	
age	0.331	0.101	**	-0.065	0.066	
education	0.239	0.102	*	0.297	0.070	***
Adj. R-squared	0.169			0.168		
F-statistic	6.284(7/175 DF)***			7.02(7/213 DF)***		
(Intercept)	-0.373	0.304		-0.053	0.201	
radio use	0.128	0.088		0.157	0.058	**
gender	0.127	0.087		0.037	0.059	
age	0.372	0.103	***	-0.056	0.068	
education	0.223	0.103	*	0.268	0.071	***
Adj. R-squared	0.146			0.143		
F-statistic	5.403(7/173DF)***			6.186(7/210DF)***		
(Intercept)	-0.136	0.279		0.064	0.196	
newspaper use	0.271	0.084	**	0.147	0.060	*
gender	0.158	0.084	.	0.072	0.059	
age	0.292	0.103	**	-0.082	0.070	
education	0.195	0.100	.	0.248	0.073	***
Adj. R-squared	0.191			0.130		
F-statistic	7.073(7/173 DF)***			5.625(7/209 DF)***		
(Intercept)	-0.241	0.293		0.021	0.201	
internet use	0.098	0.099		0.091	0.067	
gender	0.132	0.088		0.072	0.061	
age	0.360	0.104	***	-0.030	0.070	
education	0.202	0.105	.	0.263	0.073	***
Adj. R-squared	0.136			0.116		
F-statistic	5.043(7/173 DF)***			5.06(7/209 DF)***		

Notes: Country fixed effects applied;
Significance codes: ***=0.001, **=0.01, *=0.05, .=0.1

A last step of the analysis concerns the comparisons of the media usage by the disaffected with the other three groups identified in the factor analysis. To this aim, Figure and show predicted values for persons which are one standard deviation below (dashed lines) and above (solid lines) the average of investedness and below (grey lines) and above (black lines) the average of allegiance. In addition, the 10% confidence intervals are shown.

With the exception of internet use and conventional participation, the relationship between media usage and participation is consistently positive for the disaffected persons (the grey dashed lines). For the other groups, the relationship is less clear and sometimes even negative. Especially for conventional participation, media usage has clearly redistributional consequences, since the differences in political engagement among the people who use media are less pronounced than the differences for individuals who do not get informed via the media.

Figure 3: Relationship between media usage and conventional participation at different levels of support and investedness: predicted values from linear regression models

invested and allegiant
invested but not allegiant
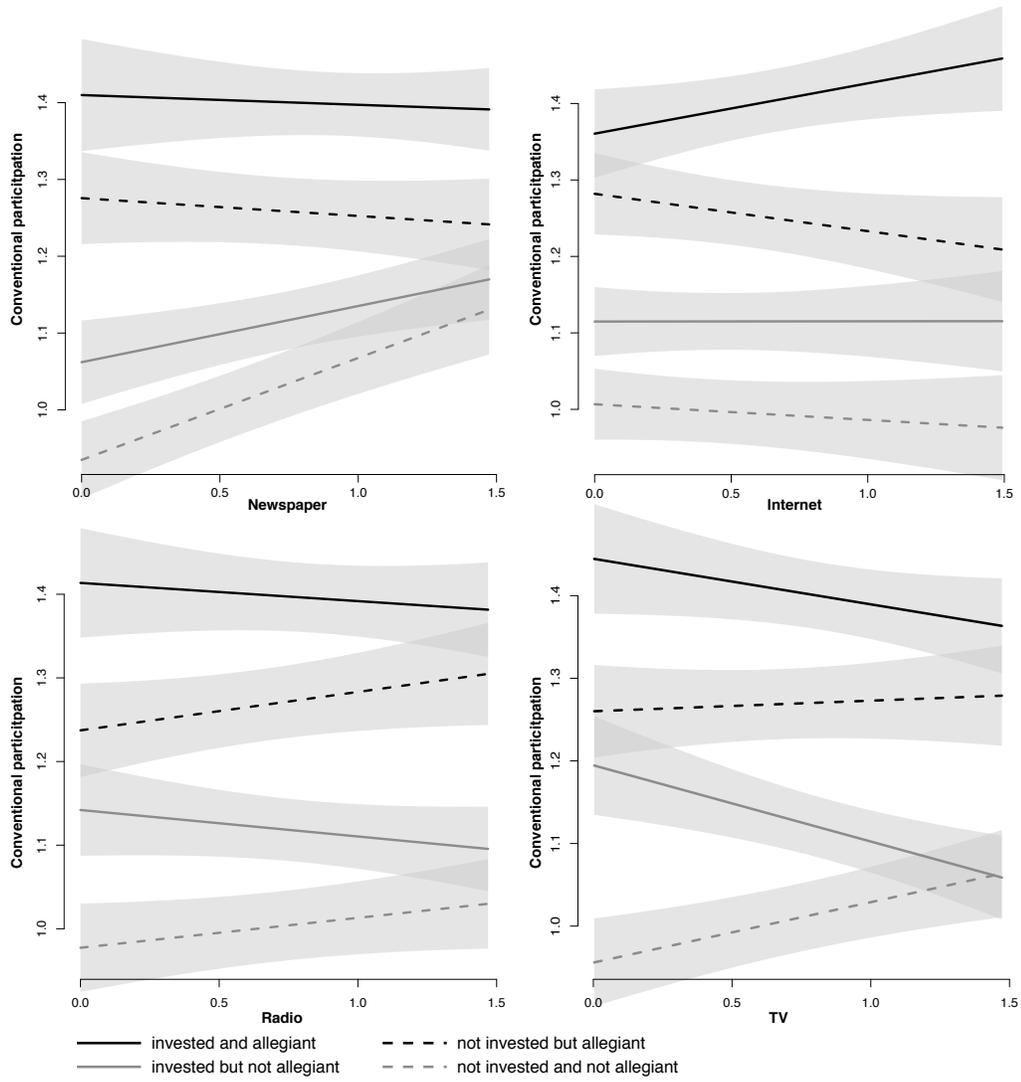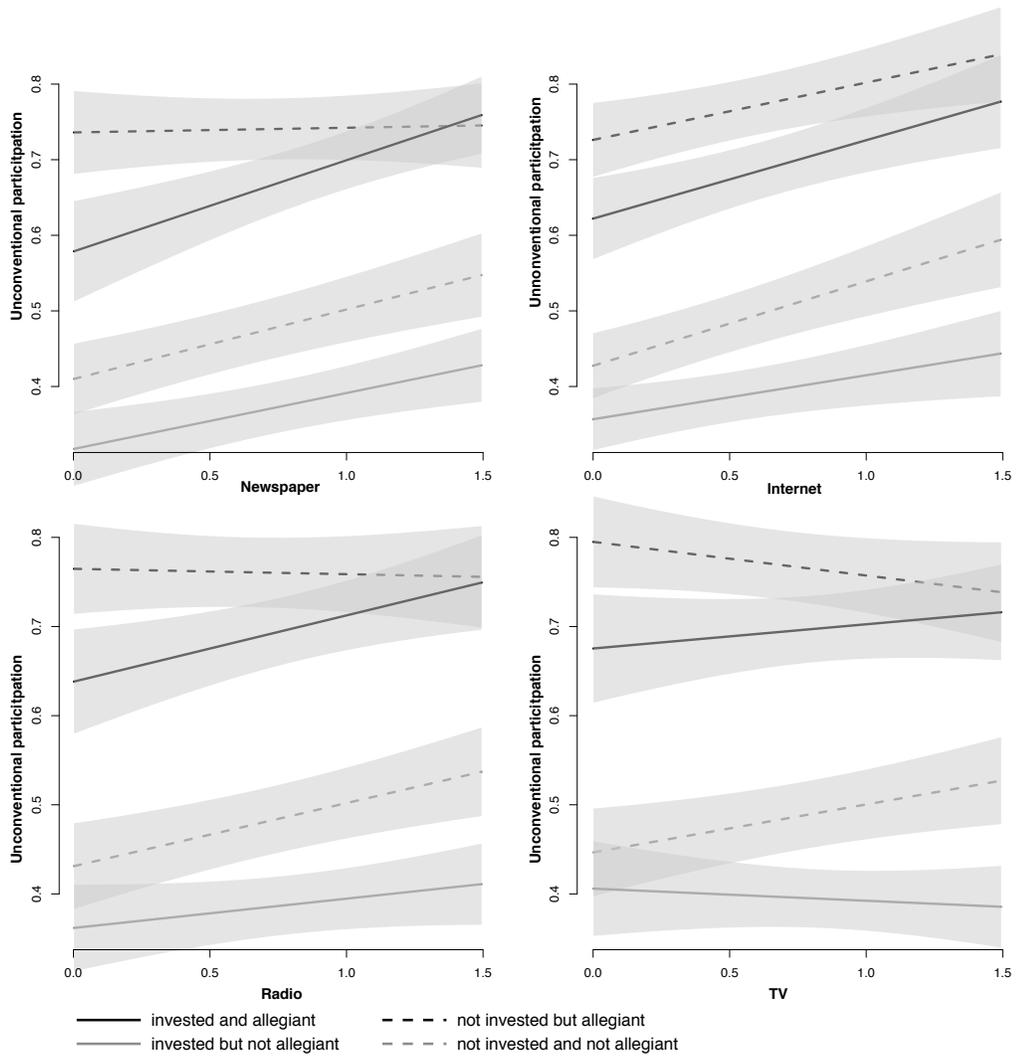not invested but allegiant
not invested and not allegiant

Figure 4: Relationship between media usage and unconventional participation at different levels of support and investedness: predicted values from linear regression models

Conclusion

Our results show that the Gamson mobilization hypothesis should be complemented with media usage. For most media, the empirical evidence corroborates that disaffected persons with a higher media consumption also engage more often in conventional as well as unconventional forms of political participation. Moreover, across the four groups separated by high or low investedness and allegiance, media is most positively related to higher levels of participation among the disaffected citizens.

Our interpretation is that the increase in non-substantive, entertaining content in the media has redistributional consequences. Political news disseminated by the media is better received by disaffected citizens, while the mobilization of interested and allegiant persons is less pronouncedly linekd to media consumption.

So far, we could only present correlational evidence, which hopefully motivates further research with a focus on the causal mechanisms of these relationships. In this regard, we found that some few panel data sets such as the Swiss household panel allow an examination of the causal relationships between political support nedia usage and poltical engagement, although only for a few years and a restricted set of indicators.

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Appendix

Table 3: Averages, standard deviations and number of missing values for main indicators used in the analyses

Indicator	Average	SD	N missing
Trust in government	5.87	2.34	77
Trust in parliament	5.54	2.58	44
Satisfaction with local democracy	6.14	2.21	129
Satisfaction with national democracy	5.56	2.39	47
Interest in local politics	2.97	0.84	23
Interest in national politics	3.21	0.76	25
Understanding of politics	6.19	2.26	45
Qualified to participate	5.34	2.78	57
Newspaper use	3.73	2.71	38
TV use	3.80	2.59	21
Internet use	2.98	2.68	73
Radio use	3.60	2.72	55
Conventional participation	2.36	1.00	787
Unconventional participation	1.38	1.15	170

Table 4: Linear regressions relating media use and political participation

	conventional participation			unconventional participation		
	Estimate	Std.Err	Pr($>$ $|t|$)	Estimate	Std.Err	Pr($>$ $|t|$)
(Intercept)	0.717	0.053	***	0.359	0.045	***
internet	-0.001	0.018		0.087	0.016	***
invested	0.093	0.024	***	-0.087	0.023	***
allegiant	0.263	0.026	***	0.284	0.024	***
gender	0.045	0.017	**	0.036	0.016	*
age	0.180	0.018	***	-0.006	0.016	
education	0.090	0.018	***	0.097	0.016	***
internet:invested	0.064	0.034	.	-0.014	0.031	
internet:allegiant	0.020	0.036		0.005	0.032	
invested:allegiant	-0.030	0.040		-0.034	0.038	
internet:invested:allegiant	0.094	0.066		0.082	0.060	
Adjusted R-squared	0.199			0.176		
F-statistic	57.55***(13/2954 DF)			57.77***(13/3447 DF)		
(Intercept)	0.703	0.053	***	0.370	0.046	***
newspaper	0.046	0.018	*	0.074	0.017	***
invested	0.129	0.027	***	-0.124	0.025	***
allegiant	0.349	0.030	***	0.294	0.028	***
gender	0.050	0.017	**	0.036	0.016	*
age	0.173	0.018	***	-0.034	0.016	*
education	0.091	0.018	***	0.104	0.016	***
newspaper:invested	-0.026	0.032		0.047	0.030	
newspaper:allegiant	-0.122	0.034	***	-0.019	0.032	
invested:allegiant	0.007	0.044		-0.065	0.041	
newspaper:invested:allegiant	0.070	0.058		0.135	0.054	*
Adjusted R-squared	0.205			0.174		
F-statistic	60.24***(13/2976 DF)			57.36***(13/3470 DF)		
(Intercept)	0.702	0.053	***	0.412	0.046	***
radio	0.006	0.018		0.044	0.016	**
invested	0.168	0.026	***	-0.097	0.024	***
allegiant	0.269	0.030	***	0.307	0.027	***
gender	0.051	0.017	**	0.034	0.016	*
age	0.185	0.018	***	-0.032	0.016	*
education	0.094	0.018	***	0.099	0.016	***
radio:invested	-0.067	0.031	*	0.020	0.029	
radio:allegiant	0.010	0.033		-0.017	0.030	
invested:allegiant	0.012	0.044		-0.058	0.041	
radio:invested:allegiant	0.000	0.054		0.121	0.051	*
Adjusted R-squared	0.201			0.173		
F-statistic	58.49***(13/2966 DF)			56.84***(13/3455 DF)		
(Intercept)	0.722	0.052	***	0.428	0.045	***
tv	-0.015	0.018		0.007	0.016	
invested	0.211	0.028	***	-0.079	0.026	**
allegiant	0.280	0.032	***	0.311	0.030	***
gender	0.050	0.017	**	0.031	0.016	*
age	0.186	0.018	***	-0.025	0.016	
education	0.094	0.018	***	0.104	0.016	***
tv:invested	-0.112	0.031	***	-0.003	0.028	
tv:allegiant	-0.010	0.034		-0.024	0.031	
invested:allegiant	-0.054	0.048		-0.080	0.045	.
tv:invested:allegiant	0.093	0.053	.	0.129	0.050	**
Adjusted R-squared	0.204			0.169		
F-statistic	60.06***(13/2985 DF)			55.6***(13/3483 DF)		

Notes: Significance codes: ***=0.001, **=0.01, *=0.05, .=0.1