

# A Virtuous Circle for All? Media Exposure and Political Trust in Europe\*

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The low levels of electoral turnout during the last European elections have raised a debate around the increasing disengagement that citizens have been showing towards the political process in general. Explanations from political communication suggest some contrasting arguments around this issue that has been configured as a constant in the academic debate: the relationship between the mass media and the political commitment. On one hand, we find authors that accuse the media and especially the negative presentation of politics of causing citizens' disaffection. On the other hand, some recent analyses state that political information in the media—regardless of their tone—leads to an informed and engaged public. Taking the cited framework as the main reference, this article compares the connection between trust in parliamentary national institutions, as one of the dimensions of political disaffection, and the media in 21 European countries categorized in three groups: the Western and Northern countries, known as stable democracies with high levels of trust, the Southern countries, known as rather disaffected and the young democracies in Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** media, political trust, European elections, political disaffection

## *¿Un círculo virtuoso para todos? Exposición mediática y confianza política en Europa*

*Los bajos niveles de votantes, durante las últimas elecciones europeas, han hecho surgir el debate acerca del creciente alejamiento político que los ciudadanos han demostrado hacia el proceso político en general. La comunicación política ofrece explicaciones que sugieren algunos argumentos contrastantes acerca de la cuestión que ha sido configurada como una constante en el debate académico: la relación entre los medios masivos y el compromiso político. Por una parte, se encontraron autores que acusan a los medios y especialmente a su presentación negativa de la política que provoca la desafección de los ciudadanos. Por otra parte, algunos análisis recientes aseguran que la información política en los medios—sin importar su tono—logra un público informado y comprometido. Tomando el marco citado como referencia principal, este artículo compara la relación entre confianza en las instituciones nacionales parlamentarias, una de las dimensiones de la desafección política, y los medios de 21 países europeos categorizados en tres grupos: los países occidentales y del norte, conocidos como democracias estables con altos niveles de confianza, los países del sur, conocidos como los desafectos y los jóvenes democracias de Europa del este.*

**Palabras clave:** medios, confianza política, elecciones europeas, desafección política

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The electoral results of last European elections in 2004<sup>1</sup>, have produced a preoccupation and have raised a debate, not only in the political sphere but also in the academic realm, around a topic that has been enormously influential in the development of political science; the disengaged attitudes that citizens have been increasingly showing towards the political process. Grouping the 25 countries of the European Union in one category, less than half (45 percent) of the Europeans having the right to vote took part in the election. Electoral turnout ranged from about 90 percent in Belgium and Luxembourg (where voting is

legally mandatory), to about 20 percent in Slovakia and Poland. These low turnout levels have revealed a trend of what has been labelled as political disaffection. Additionally, they show the same pattern which has been discovered several times in the past (e.g. Klingemann, 1999): when it comes to political disaffection, Europe is divided in three parts. In Western and Northern Europe, citizens are rather engaged, but not to the same extent as 20 years ago. In Southern Europe, citizens are traditionally rather disaffected, and in the new democracies in Eastern Europe only a minority is engaged in political life.

\* This article is based on a previous version of the paper delivered during the 55th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA), held in New York on May 2005. In this new document, we employed the same analytical dynamics, but using an updated database. The conclusions are quite similar.

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1 The final revision of this article was written one month before the European elections of 2009, expecting similar levels of electoral turnout. We would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers. Their comments and suggestions contributed definitely to improve the final document.

Many political scientists have called attention to this specific situation, which has considered quite concern among experts given the widespread feelings of low identification with the political process. Professionals, as well as scholars, have focused their efforts in understanding the complex developments through which we have derived in this particular guideline of conduct with respect to the public; the specific nature of these situations has to do with the low rates of political participation in general, with the negative evaluation of governmental performance, with a low degree of political knowledge and interest, and with an extended lack of identification with public institutions.

The concept of political disaffection is having a lot of significance today since it specifically characterizes the general trend of contemporary western world's political culture. This process is described basically by the combination, on the one hand, of low levels of electoral turnout, political participation, political efficacy, political knowledge, political understanding, and, on the other hand, a firm approval of democratic principles, and has been pointed out as a potential component of political system's instability. Social sciences in general, and political and media sciences specifically, have explored the causes of these behavioural patterns and have developed a theoretical framework to face this challenging phenomenon. The belief that the processes of political communication have substantially contributed to the attenuation of the citizen's political and civic engagement has become a constant conviction between scholars and journalists, especially in the North American context. Nevertheless, the development of political communication as a discipline suggests some contrasting explanations around the relationship between the mass media and the political engagement. Moreover, we find some authors that accuse the media of "narcotizing" the citizens, who are increasingly less participative and less trusting political institutions and are, in the terms of Robert Putnam, disaffected democrats (Robinson, 1976; Patterson, 1993; Fallows, 1996; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Putnam & Pharr, 2000; Putnam, 2000). As well as some recent analyses state that the empirical evidence points out in an opposite direction (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW<sup>2</sup>

### Theories of Media Malaise

The process by which the theories of media malaise were generated is somewhat imprecise. Without a doubt, we find the

origins of these interpretations in the considerations of Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang (1966). They were the first to suggest that a connection existed between the proliferation of network news and the extension of these feelings of disconnection with the political process. From their point of view, the way the television covered the news of a political nature could affect the fundamental orientations of the electorate towards public institutions, including the government. Television broadcasts, they argued, accentuate the conflicting elements of the political process, which feeds the public cynicism. Nevertheless, "*the Langs proved an isolated voice at the time, in large part because the consensus in political communication was that the mass media had only minimal effects on public opinion*" (Norris, 2000: 5). As a result, a new set of reflections began gradually to question the dominant paradigm during the sixties. The idea that the mass media had more weight than it had been previously thought began to be voiced by several publications; Paul Weaver (1972), for example, assured that the television news formats fomented "*detachment (at best) one of the cases or cynical rejection (at worse) toward the political institution of the nation*" (74).

Nevertheless, 1976 was a crucial year in the development and later consolidation of the theory of media malaise. During this year, Michael Robinson popularised the term *videomalaise* arguing that preferring television in contrast to newspapers as source of political information causes political disaffection. In order to explain the growth of videomalaise the author pointed out six interrelated factors: 1) the anomalous magnitude and shape of the television news audiences, 2) the public perceptions of the credibility of the networks, 3) the interpretative character of television news coverage, 4) the stress on negative elements of the television news reports, 5) the emphasis on the conflict and the violence in network reporting, and 6) the anti-institutional theme of news programs on television (Robinson, 1976: 426). All these elements came together to foment political disaffection, frustration, cynicism and malaise of the public.

This perspective, which became consolidated at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, makes special sense in the North American political context. Television news in the United States. do, indeed, present political life in a more negative way than newspapers do (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). Political disaffection in the U.S. increases parallel to an increase in negative news stories about politicians and political institutions in American television (Lichter & Amundson, 1994) but also newspapers (Patterson, 1993). Thus, the main studies that provided theoretical strength to the positions of media malaise in the North American context focused rather

<sup>2</sup> For a more exhaustive literature review: Luengo, 2005 y 2009.

on the negative media content, in general, than on differences between television and newspapers (Patterson, 1993; Schudson, 1995; Fallows, 1996; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). In summary, the theories of media malaise maintain two central assumptions: 1) the processes of political communication via mass media have a significant impact on the civic engagement of the citizens; 2) this impact takes shape in a negative direction or, in other words, the lack of social commitment towards the political process is determined by the process of political communication.

### Theories of Political Mobilization

The position presented before is modified by a set of scientific works whose results have been grouped under the label of theories of political mobilisation. Even though these new interpretations do not eliminate all the previous contributions, they propose substantial nuances that question the central argumentation of the videomalaise. In other words, they suggest that contemporary mass media have a significant impact on the public—this point is shared with the media malaise position—but this influence is produced in a positive direction, that is to say, maintaining and promoting democratic participation.

The theories of political mobilization appear on the academic scene with a great influence in the nineties (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Norris, 1996; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000), right after the publication of some research conclusions. We could say that the first works in this line arise as a result of the contrast of the media malaise hypotheses. To some extent, this interpretation considers that, by simply differentiating some analytical categories, we can conclude that the media malaise theories are not strictly applicable as they were formulated. Fundamentally, mobilisation theories underline that “*we need carefully to disentangle the positive and negative effects of different media, messages, audiences and effects*” (Norris et al., 1999: 99). In this sense, for example, the group of regular consumers of television news and habitual readers of political press are—regardless of tone of media coverage—more inclined to be informed, interested and committed to political life. On the contrary, citizens exposed to sensationalist contents usually present significant levels of political disaffection, cynicism and alienation.

Finally, it is vital to mention the importance of a theory that, although framed within the theories of the mobilization, acquires a special status, since its considerations entail significant advances with respect to the general assumptions; the theory of the *Virtuous Circle* (Norris, 2000). In spite of pro-

posing a similar perspective to the contributions of the theory of political mobilization and objecting to the conclusions of the media malaise, the theory of the virtuous circle, stated by Pippa Norris, goes one step further and provides a more complete theoretical elaboration. As a result of the examination of empirical evidence, derived from data analysis of the US and Western Europe, one of the main assumptions of this theory resides in the following statement: the attention to the news in general is not configured as a factor that contributes to the erosion of the support for the political system. On the contrary, those consistently exposed to news and electoral campaigns are revealed as most knowledgeable in political terms, as most trusting of the government and the political system, and as the most participative in electoral terms.

In conclusion, Pippa Norris assures that the process of political communication could be understood as a virtuous circle since, in the long term, it reinforces the activism of the activists. Indeed, given that this mechanism works in a circle, like a spiral, we can observe a double directionality; the most politically informed, those who trust more and are more participative, are those who are more exposed to the media coverage of public issues. Those that are more exposed to the media coverage of public issues are more committed to the political system. This assumption implicates that we cannot prove causation or, in other words, the direction of causality remains unresolved. It is supported by empirical data which shows that especially regular readers of political newspapers are less disaffected than people not reading the political press. In contrast, watching television news does not seem to have the same positive effect (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000).

### III. STUDY FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

While the media malaise hypothesis states that the negative tone of media coverage—and especially the negative tone of television coverage—causes political disaffection, the mobilization hypothesis states that political information from the news media—regardless of the tone of coverage—leads to a mobilized and trusting public. Both contradicting hypotheses have mainly been examined in the U.S. context and seem to be supported by empirical studies to the same extent. This may be a question of used methods. Studies on the media malaise hypothesis usually work with time series analyses comparing media content and survey data on the aggregate level (e.g., Patterson, 1993) or experiments measuring the influence of single media stimuli on the individual level of disaffection

(e.g., Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Studies on the mobilization hypothesis usually work with survey data on the individual level without including media content data at all (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 1990).

To combine those two different points of view, there are two possibilities to include media content in surveys on the individual level. The first one is to connect individually used media content to individual levels of disaffection and to compare the different influences of exposure to different media content in one country (Miller et al., 1979). This requires content analysis of several media and survey data of recipients which includes detailed media exposure and measures of political disaffection. Data of this kind is, of course, hardly available. The second one is to compare the influence of media exposure on political disaffection between several countries. Different countries have different media systems (e.g., Norris, 2004), and different journalistic cultures (e.g., Cohen et al., 1996; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Additionally, in different countries there are different states of political affairs —political decisions, legislative bills, economic growth etc. Taken together, this should lead to different kinds of media content— different topics and different tones of coverage (e.g., Rössler, 2004). If media content is of no importance for the relationship between media use and political disaffection, the same pattern should occur in every country: citizens heavily exposed to political media content should be less disaffected. If media content matters, there should be differences between the countries: in some countries, there should be a positive relationship, in others, there should be a negative relationship or no relationship at all.

Therefore, in our study we are examining the relationship between media exposure and political disaffection in 21 European countries taking part in the European Social Survey (ESS). Those countries can be grouped with respect to their area of location which also means to group them with respect to their democratic history. Studies comparing different political cultures state that the level of political disaffection is connected to the democratic tradition (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1965). For that reason, we distinguished three groups of countries: 1) the well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), 2) the countries of Southern Europe (Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal) with the exception of Italy, a relatively young democracy, and 3) the extremely young democracies in Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia).

Compared to media systems in the whole world, the media systems of the 21 countries included in this study can be

characterized as free and preventing wide access to political information. This holds especially true for the media systems of the countries in Western/Northern Europe. Press freedom is ranked somewhat lower in the Eastern European countries and Italy (Norris, 2004). Studies on journalistic cultures including at least some countries included in our study show that journalists in some European countries (Germany, Italy) are more partisan than their colleagues in other countries (Sweden, UK) are (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). But comparable data for all 21 countries is not available. The same holds true for data on media content. There are some studies showing that there are differences in media content in several European countries when it comes to political issues (Peter, 2003; Rössler, 2004). But there are no studies systematically comparing the presentations of politicians and political institutions in different countries' media. In contrast, there are studies on Europeans political attitudes. As we have already shown, the three groups of European countries traditionally show different levels of political disaffection. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The groups of countries differ in their citizens' levels of political disaffection. Citizens living in the Eastern European countries will be most disaffected. Citizens in the Western/Northern European countries will be less disaffected.

Thus far, there is no comparable data of exposure to political media content in those 21 countries. If the assumptions of the mobilization hypothesis are correct, citizens living in areas with high levels of political disaffection should show the lowest levels of exposure to political media content. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H2: The groups of countries differ in their citizens' level of exposure to political media content. Citizens living in the Eastern European countries will show the lowest levels of exposure. Citizens in the Western/Northern European countries will show the highest levels of exposure.

As we already pointed out, when taking a look at the empirical data that has been published, we cannot be sure which one of the hypothesis, media malaise or mobilization, is correct. We cannot be sure whether the relationship between exposure to political media content and political disaffection is positive or negative, and —because there is not much comparable research— whether the relationship direction is the same in all 21 countries. Therefore, we pose the following research questions:

QR1: Is the relationship between exposure to political media content and political disaffection positive or negative?

RQ2: Is there any difference between the 21 countries when the relationship between exposure to political media content and political disaffection is concerned?

Finally, if there are differences between the 21 countries, and categorizing them in the three groups mentioned makes sense, the following pattern should occur:

H3: If there are differences between the 21 countries when the relationship between exposure to political media content and political disaffection is concerned, the differences should be larger between groups than within groups.

#### IV. METHOD

Our data comes from the European Social Survey (ESS), mainly Round 3. Starting in 2006 and ending in 2007, about 43.000 Europeans aged 15 years and older had been interviewed face to face. The project was jointly founded by the European Commission, the European Science Foundation, and academic funding bodies in each participating country. Addresses were randomly selected in all 21 countries participating in the study<sup>3</sup>. The exact procedure differed slightly from country to country. Table 1 shows the number of respondents and response rates in the 21 countries. The differences between non-response rates from previous versions of the ESS have been reduced. The problems introduced by the “non-response” were reduced by weighting the data<sup>4</sup>.

#### Independent variables

The questionnaire included questions on respondents' exposure to political media content. They were: “*On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about political and current affairs?*” and “*On an average weekday, how much of your time reading the newspapers is spent reading about politics and current affairs?*”. In both cases, the possible answers, presented on cards, ranged from 0 (“*no time at all*”) in grades of half an hour to 7 (“*more than 3 hours*”). Additionally, the questionnaire included socio-demographic characteristic of respondents like gender, age (year of birth) and education (years of education completed) and political interest which will be controlled in multivariate analyses presented later.

#### Dependent variable

As already pointed out, political disaffection can be measured in several ways. One of the alternatives, as Pippa Norris (1999) argues, is connected to the concept of political support, which could be understood on a continuum ranging from general support for democracy (diffuse) to support for individual politicians (specific). Rather in the middle of the continuum, we find support for political institutions. For that reason, we decided to choose trust in the national parliaments as our measure of political disaffection. The question was: “*Using this card, please tell me on a score 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. [country]’s parliament.*”

**Table 1**  
**The European Social Survey 2006–2007**

	Respondents n	Response Rate %
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>		
Austria	2 278	94.7
Belgium	1 770	98.4
Switzerland	1 711	94.8
Germany	2 829	97.0
Denmark	1 484	98.6
Finland	1 883	99.3
France	1 940	97.7
United Kingdom	2 346	98.0
Ireland	1 720	95.6
Luxembourg	1 458	89.2
Netherlands	1 866	98.8
Norway	1 743	99.6
Sweden	1 879	97.5
<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Spain	1 779	94.9
Greece	2 406	98.4
Italy	1 515	98.0
Portugal	2 079	93.6
<i>Eastern Europe</i>		
Czech Republic	3 026	96.0
Hungary	1 456	95.9
Poland	1 673	97.2
Slovenia	1 404	95.1

Source: European Social Survey (Round 2, Round 3).

<sup>3</sup> We are using 21 countries out of the 30 that compose the sample.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information see: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

## V. FINDINGS

## Trust in national parliaments

H1 states that political disaffection will be lowest in the well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe and highest in the young democracies in Eastern Europe. Table 2 shows that this proves almost completely to be right. The seven countries with highest levels of trust in national parliaments are located in Western and especially Northern Europe.

**Table 2**  
Trust in national parliaments  
in 21 European countries

	Mean	SD
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>		
Austria	4.9	2.4
Belgium	4.9	2.1
Switzerland	5.7	2.0
Germany	4.0	2.3
Denmark	6.4	2.1
Finland	6.0	2.1
France	4.3	2.3
United Kingdom	4.2	2.3
Ireland	4.8	2.4
Luxembourg	5.8	2.2
Netherlands	5.3	1.9
Norway	5.6	2.2
Sweden	5.6	2.2
<i>Average</i>	<i>4.75</i>	<i>2.19</i>
<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Spain	4.9	2.3
Greece	4.7	2.5
Italy	4.5	2.4
Portugal	3.8	2.3
<i>Average</i>	<i>4.47</i>	<i>2.37</i>
<i>Eastern Europe</i>		
Czech Republic	3.2	3.2
Hungary	3.3	2.5
Poland	2.7	2.2
Slovenia	4.2	2.4
<i>Average</i>	<i>3.35</i>	<i>2.57</i>

Note: Scale ranging from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust)  
Source: European Social Survey (Round 2, Round 3).

Trust is highest in Denmark ( $M = 6.4$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ) and Finland ( $M = 6.0$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ). With slight exception of Slovenia, the citizens of Eastern European countries are most disaffected. Trust is lowest in Poland ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ) and the Czech Republic ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 3.2$ ). Comparing the three groups of countries, we find an average mean of 4.75 in Western/Northern Europe of 4.47 in Southern Europe and of 3.35 in Eastern Europe. Interestingly, standard deviations do not differ that much. This means that the differences between respondents within the three groups are about the same.

## Exposure to political media content

H2 states that citizens of Eastern European countries will be less exposed to political media content while citizens of Western/Northern European countries will show the highest exposure levels. This hypothesis proves right to some extent but not completely. Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents showing high levels of exposure to political media content. In our definition, these are respondents watching political information in television more than one hour per day and reading political newspaper content more than half an hour per day. The percentage of heavy users of political information in television ranges from 33.5 percent in Norway to 12.6 percent in Czech Republic. The percentage of heavy users of political information in newspapers ranges from 32.9 percent in Norway to 12.7 percent in Hungary. Looking at the three groups of countries, we, indeed, see that in average exposure to political media content is lowest in Eastern Europe. This holds true for television (16 percent) as well as for newspapers (15 percent). On the other hand, there is hardly any difference between the countries in the South and in the West/North. In both regions, we find somewhat more heavy users of political newspaper content (27/25 vs. 26/22, respectively). But the differences are only marginal. To sum it up, on the aggregate level the relatively low exposure to political media content seems to be a cause of the relatively low levels of political trust in Eastern Europe. Additionally, media exposure does not explain the difference between trust levels in Western/Northern and Southern Europe. Going a bit more in the details and having a look to single countries, we even find some contradictions. For example, in Ireland exposure to political media content is relatively high but trust is low. The opposite holds true for Sweden. Despite low levels of exposure to political media, content trust is relatively high.

**Table 3**  
**Exposure to political media content in**  
**21 European countries**

	Heavy users of political information in TV (> 1 hour per day) %	Heavy users of political information in newspapers (> 0.5 hours per day) %
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>		
Austria	12.6	29.4
Belgium	20.8	26.7
Switzerland	9.5	17.7
Germany	17.0	26.4
Denmark	33.5	31.7
Finland	26.3	30.2
France	22.3	18.6
United Kingdom	23.0	23.3
Ireland	24.5	26.9
Luxembourg	14.8	19.9
Netherlands	25.2	27.3
Norway	30.4	32.9
Sweden	22.6	25.8
<i>Average</i>	<i>21.73</i>	<i>25.90</i>
<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Spain	19.7	25.6
Greece	21.7	30.0
Italy	28.4	24.9
Portugal	31.1	29.7
<i>Average</i>	<i>25.22</i>	<i>27.55</i>
<i>Eastern Europe</i>		
Czech Republic	12.6	18.4
Hungary	16.1	12.7
Poland	19.6	14.1
Slovenia	17.4	14.1
<i>Average</i>	<i>16.42</i>	<i>14.82</i>

Source: European Social Survey (Round 2, Round 3).

### The influence of exposure to political media content on trust in national parliaments

RQ1 asks whether the relationship between exposure to political media content and political disaffection is positive or negative. RQ2 asks whether this holds true to the same extent in all of the countries. To examine this, we run OLS-Regressions for every single country. In the analyses, we control gender, age,

education and political interest. Table 4 shows the results. With respect to our control variables, we see in all of the 21 countries a strong and significant influence of political interest on trust in national parliaments. In most countries, we find that higher educated citizens are more trustful. In some countries, younger people and male respondents show higher levels of trust. More important, the influence of exposure to political media content is quite mixed. In two Western democracies (Norway, Austria), we find a negative influence of watching political information in television on trust: the higher respondents' exposure to television news, the less they are trusting. On the other hand, in none of the 21 countries there is a positive influence of watching television news on trust. In contrast, in four Western democracies (Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway), we find a positive influence of reading political information in the newspaper on trust: the higher respondents' exposure to political content in newspapers, the more they are trusting. The same holds true in one Eastern European country (Czech Republic). Finally, in any of the Southern European countries we can find a significant connection between exposure and trust, neither negative nor positive. Taken together, H3—stating that differences between the three groups of countries are larger than differences within the groups when the influence of media exposure on political disaffection is concerned—proves almost to be wrong. If there is a significant influence of exposure to political media content on trust in national parliaments, it is in the same direction (negative for TV, positive for newspapers), not only within the groups but also between the groups. In Southern Europe, negative  $\beta$  coefficients, quite close significant in the case of Portugal, show to be almost an exception in the case of newspapers.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study examines the influence of exposure to political media content on political disaffection. In former studies, different results have been obtained. Some studies have shown that negative media content leads to political disaffection. This has been called the *media malaise hypothesis*. Other studies have shown that exposure to political media content—regardless of its tone—leads to informed and mobilized citizens. This has been called the *mobilization hypothesis*. To examine, which of them holds true, we analyzed the relationship between exposure to political media content and trust in national parliaments in 21 European countries taking part in the last European Social Survey. The countries differ in their political systems and in their democratic tradition, as well as in their journalistic cultures. Our results show clear difference in the levels of trust between the countries. Respondents from the

Table 4  
Causes of trust in national parliaments in 21 European countries

	Gender (male) $\beta$	Age $\beta$	Education $\beta$	Political Interest $\beta$	Exposure to political content TV $\beta$	Exposure to political content Newspaper $\beta$	R2
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>							
Austria	.006	.005	.109***	-.168***	-.066**	-.020	.045
Belgium	-.038	.115***	.089**	-.255***	-.043	.022	.104
Switzerland	.005	.095**	.082**	-.083**	.018	.029	.024
Germany	.030	-.009	.065**	-.077**	.025	.084***	.029
Denmark	.086**	.032	.193***	-.176***	.047	.002	.097
Finland	.014	.141***	.091***	-.163***	.006	.040	.063
France	.047	-.043	.210***	-.129***	.013	-.015	.077
United Kingdom	.031	-.021	.113	-.116***	-.042	-.036	.028
Ireland	.106***	-.025	.009	-.210***	-.054	.020	.058
Luxembourg	.053	.005	-.014	-.116**	.001	.113**	.035
Netherlands	.044	.078**	.117***	-.182***	-.044	.056*	.076
Norway	.009	.012	.207***	-.151***	-.053*	.079**	.100
Sweden	.103***	.049	.171***	-.209***	-.020	.039	.113
<i>Southern Europe</i>							
Spain	-.010	-.052	.012	-.243***	.041	-.030	.059
Greece	-.041	-.015	.010	-.241***	-.014	-.010	.050
Italy	-----	-.036	.064*	-.258***	-.024	-.014	.068
Portugal	.008	-.024	.039	-.239***	-.027	-.041	.064
<i>Eastern Europe</i>							
Czech Republic	-.017	.078**	.046*	-.066**	-.007	.078**	.016
Hungary	-.008	-.051	.117***	-.100**	.049	-.021	.031
Poland	-.010	-.010	.021	-.115**	-.028	-.011	.007
Slovenia	.098**	.011	.043	-.123**	-.019	-.029	.023

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Source: European Social Survey (Round 2, Round 3).

well established Western/Northern democracies show high levels of trust in their parliaments. Respondents from the younger democracies in the South show lower levels of trust while respondents from the extremely young democracies in the East show the lowest levels of trust. When it comes to the influence of media exposure on trust, we find strong patterns. Firstly, watching television news has not a positive influence on trust at all. In contrast, in at least two countries, it has a negative influence. This clearly contradicts mobilization hypothesis. Secondly, exposure to political content in newspapers has a positive influence on trust in parliament in 4 out of 13 Western/Northern democracies. Interestingly, all of them belong to

the countries showing the highest levels of trust. It also has a positive influence in one out of four Eastern democracies. Both results seem to support mobilization hypothesis, since in Southern countries, we find a negative influence of exposure to political content in newspapers on trust, but never with enough statistical signification.

Taken together, mobilization hypothesis cannot be supported totally. It states that exposure to political media content—regardless of its tone—mobilizes the recipients. In this case, we should have found about the same results in all 21 countries, and for every media outlet controlled. Why



was this not the case? We do not believe that this is a question of different recipient characteristics in different countries. In our opinion, this is a question of media content. Following the media malaise hypothesis, we assume that a longstanding negative presentation of political affairs leads to political disaffection. Of course, the same holds true for the opposite: a longstanding positive presentation of political affairs leads to political trust. Especially, in the Northern European countries the level of trust in parliament is extremely high. In the same countries, there is a strong influence of newspaper exposure on trust in parliament.

We assume that the level of trust is high because of a longstanding relatively positive presentation of political affairs in those countries' newspapers. Given the positive influence of newspaper exposure on trust in at least one young Eastern democracies, we can assume that those citizens —when political

media content is relatively positive for a longer period— make up their deficits in trust. In the long run, they may overtake the countries in the South where there is no influence of exposure to political content in newspapers on trust.

Of course, this analysis is only a first step. We cannot prove our assumptions to be right without having comparable content analysis data for all of the 21 countries. Only when this is the case, we can definitely say that the different results in different countries are really caused by different kinds of media content. Nevertheless, comparing the relationship between media exposure and political trust in different countries leads to valuable results. Exposure to political media content is not necessarily mobilizing the public. This holds true in some countries. Future studies should further examine the causes of those differences.



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