

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Effects of Strategic News on Political Cynicism and Vote Choice Among Young Voters

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This study investigates the relationship between strategic news exposure and political cynicism and vote choice among young voters in the context of a referendum on an issue of European integration. Using a survey (n = 720) and a media content analysis, we link media use measures to indicators of media content so as to provide a compelling link between exposure to media content and cynicism. As hypothesized, we find a positive relationship between exposure to strategically framed campaign coverage and political cynicism. In addition, we find that cynicism is related to voting “No,” which suggests that cynicism served as an intervening factor in the relationship between media exposure and a No vote. The results are discussed in the light of extant research on media, political cynicism, and electoral behavior in the case of direct democracy.

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The effects of mediated political campaign communication have been subject to a great amount of scholarly inquiry. Particularly, the alleged persistent negativity in the media's coverage of political affairs has been blamed for contributing to increasing levels of public cynicism and disengagement. Following Robinson's (1976) “video malaise” thesis, several studies demonstrated the news media's increasingly strong emphasis on campaign tactics and the horse race and showed how this mode of coverage negatively affects citizens' political attitudes and behavior (Fallows, 1996; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 2002; Sabato, 1991). Scholars and media critics have referred to a “spiral of cynicism” in which the news media's strategic framing of politicians and their campaigns—that is, news emphasizing the political performance of and battle among politicians on the campaign trail, as well as the tactics they use in pursuing political victory—turns off voters, contributes to cynical and negative public attitudes toward and alienation from the political process.

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This concern is argued to be especially pertinent to political novices such as young citizens. Various scholars have argued that today's young citizens are more cynical about and disillusioned with politics, and, as a result, less likely to engage with or participate in political processes such as elections than older generations of voters are (see, e.g., Bennett, 2000; Putnam, 2000). In addition to theories of political socialization, the media generally take central stage in explanations of young adults' attitudinal and behavioral tendencies. Consequently, previous studies have linked the negative and strategic depiction of politics in the news with the gloomy political mind-set of young voters, who, in the light of their political inexperience, may be considered rather prone to fall victim to cynicism and mistrust (see Lau & Erber, 1985). These assumptions have led to claims and conjectures about the news media's contribution to young citizens' indifference and apathy toward politics and political processes (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Patterson, 2002). However, the robustness and pervasiveness of these effects among younger citizens in different campaign contexts have thus far largely been assumed and not yet thoroughly examined at the individual level.

Furthermore, high levels of public cynicism have mostly been used to explain declining electoral *turnout* in contemporary democracies, most notably in the United States (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993, 2002). Less attention has been devoted to the role of media-instigated political cynicism in explaining the electorate's *choice* of vote, and no study has considered this in the context of a referendum. Specifically, an important yet unanswered question is whether a mass-mediated referendum campaign that fuels citizens' cynical perceptions about the campaign itself can indirectly also encourage a vote against a referendum proposal that is advocated through that campaign by the political establishment. In effect, there are good reasons to treat political cynicism both as a key dependent variable, which may vary according to media content, and as an independent variable to explain electoral behavior.

The present study examines the intervenient role of political cynicism in the relationship between strategic news exposure and voting behavior among young voters in a referendum. Specifically, we examine the relationship between exposure to strategic news coverage and levels of political cynicism among young voters and subsequently investigate the predictive role of political cynicism on young voters' support for the ballot proposal. We use the Dutch 2005 national referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty to address these relationships. Given that most studies on political strategy news, levels of cynicism, and young adults' uses of mediated campaign communication have been conducted in the United States, this study broadens the focus to European campaign contexts where the political and media systems are fundamentally different (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006).

The effects of strategic news on political cynicism

Several experimental studies, mostly carried out in U.S. political and news contexts, have compellingly shown that participants exposed to political coverage framed in

terms of strategy are significantly more inclined to implement strategic considerations in interpreting and evaluating political behavior, issues, and campaigns (de Vreese, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). Previous experimental research has also demonstrated that subjects prove more cynical as a result of strategic news exposure (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2004; see also Crigler, Just, & Belt, 2006).

Although experiments are especially useful for testing causal hypotheses while ensuring high internal validity, the unnatural settings of and forced exposure in these tests form a limitation. Pinkleton and Austin (2001) investigated the link between general news media use and political cynicism by means of a cross-sectional survey. They found that citizens who considered newspapers their most important source of information tended to be less cynical than others, whereas a slightly positive, but insignificant, association was found between cynicism and television news dependency. Pinkleton and Austin (2001), however, do not explain why different news media may have differential effects, but merely speculate that "more newspaper use presumably leads to more knowledge," which "could be the reason why cynicism is lower" (p. 330). To find convincing explanations, it becomes necessary to assess the actual media *content* individuals have been exposed to, as well as the frequency of this exposure (see also Slater, 2004).

Studies by de Vreese and Semetko (2002) and de Vreese (2005), drawing on two-wave panel surveys with repeated measures of political cynicism and detailed data on news media use and content, conducted in European political and media contexts, showed that, after controlling for prior cynicism levels, the strongest *increases* in cynicism were among those individuals who had been exposed the most to strategic news. de Vreese's (2005) cross-national study additionally demonstrated that media effects on political cynicism are conditional upon the pervasiveness of strategic framing in the news. Comparing a context where strategic framing was highly visible in the news with one where the level was relatively low, he found that exposure to news contributed to a significant increase in cynicism in the "high-level" news context, whereas political cynicism actually decreased after news exposure in the "low-level" context. Thus, contrary to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), who concluded that "it is not necessary to consume a lot strategic news to see its effects" (p. 168), de Vreese's (2005) findings suggest that the effects of news on cynicism are contingent on the level of strategy reporting in the news.

Young voters, strategic news, and political cynicism

Young voters might generally be more receptive to negative and strategic framing in the news, regardless of the prevalence of such news, than older voters. Research indicates that young people have less stable and more discontinuous political orientations than those with higher age, more experience, and more sophistication in politics (Jennings & Niemi, 1978, 1981). Consequently, young people can be considered relatively susceptible to persuasion or change (Sears, 1983, 1986). As a primary source of political information, the media are thus likely to exert a significant

influence on young adults' still-developing understanding of and relatively uncrytallized attitudes toward politics and political processes. From this perspective, it would appear that young voters are most vulnerable to being caught in a spiral of cynicism and apathy when exposed to strategic coverage of political affairs. Thus, young voters' levels of cynicism might potentially be quite easily affected by strategic news exposure or, rephrasing this assumption, less strategically framed news would seem to be necessary to invoke cynical feelings among younger publics.

Despite the concern and charges put forward about the news media's fixation on strategic political coverage and their malign effects among young people in particular, this relationship has thus far never been thoroughly investigated. A number of studies that have linked political cognitions, attitudes, or participation to both news media use and age have effectively taken an aggregate level intercohort comparative approach (e.g., Bennett, 1997, 1998; Putnam, 2000). This body of research provides valuable insights into significant generational and societal-level trends over time, but it does not provide data to assess the potentially differential effects of mediated campaign information emerging *within* the younger age cohort. We need to provide a better understanding of how young people's news consumption really relates to their political attitudes and involvement, which calls for taking into account the characteristics of the news. We assume that young voters' exposure to differential news media contents has differential effects (see Moy & Pfau, 2000; Pfau, Brian Houston, & Semmler, 2007). Accordingly, it is expected that the relationship between exposure to strategically framed campaign news and political cynicism is contingent upon the presence of the strategic news frame in the contents of news (de Vreese, 2005).

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to media outlets reporting more strategically about a referendum campaign has a stronger positive effect on political cynicism than exposure to outlets covering the campaign less strategically.

The effects of strategic news and political cynicism on vote choice

Studies considering the effects of strategic news and media-induced cynicism on voting behavior have primarily focused on mobilization as a dependent variable, but there is disagreement in the literature on whether these effects are uniformly detrimental, if extant at all (cf. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Leshner & Thorson, 2000; Patterson, 2002). In fact, more recent research has suggested that, in the light of an exponentially increased media choice, scholars might better look beyond the news for (de)mobilizing effects of media, and rather focus on more entertainment-based formats that convey different types of political information or no such information whatsoever (e.g., Prior, 2005; see also Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005).

Nevertheless, previous research has mostly left uninvestigated the question as to whether media-sparked cynicism may also affect the behavior of those citizens that *do* turn out to vote. Although election studies have shown that politically embittered

voters may hold strong preferences to vote for nonestablished protest parties (e.g., Bélanger & Aarts, 2006; Hetherington, 1999; Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998), and a modest body of referendum studies suggests that disaffected voters are less inclined to support a referendum proposal when the referendum is initiated or the proposal is advocated by the very political bodies that are the object of public distrust (see Lowery & Sigelman, 1981; Pesonen, 1998), this research has predominantly treated cynicism or distrust as prior political attitudes; that is, as an exogenous predictor of the vote. Effectively, there are only very few studies linking measures of news media use, cynicism, and vote choice in a single study. However, given that most people rely on the political information that comes from the media, it seems sensible to examine the potential intervenient role of cynicism in the relationship between media exposure and vote choice. This media-driven dynamic was recently exemplified in a study by Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, and Oegema (2006), who demonstrated that negative news media coverage discouraged trust in political leaders over the course of the Dutch 2002 election campaign. This residual trust, in turn, significantly impacted on actual party vote choice, showing how political news can affect final vote decisions, mediated by (dis)trust in politicians.

In this study, we focus on the relationship between strategic news and political cynicism in the specific context of a referendum campaign. We investigate whether cynical attitudes about the campaign, its conduct, and the performance of campaigning politicians have an independent effect on the vote, above and beyond the already established predictors of nay voting in referendums. Particularly in referendums initiated from within the political establishment, involving proposals that promote a new policy or change to the status quo, the incumbent government might be expected to be more vulnerable to this type of cynicism, as it effectively is the incumbent on the “Yes” side that has to campaign and win over the voters to endorse the proposed new policy, whereas the “No” opposition does not. We thus expect politically cynical young voters to be inclined to vote against a referendum proposal that is supported by the political elite and promoted by politicians of the established political parties through the campaign.

Hypothesis 2: Political cynicism toward the campaign is a positive predictor of a No vote in a referendum.

Method

We draw on two data sources: first, a cross-sectional survey with a sample of the Dutch young electorate, and second, a quantitative content analysis of all referendum coverage in print and television news during the final 6 weeks of the referendum campaign leading up to the national referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty on June 1, 2005. Our study is designed to link the content analysis of the news media coverage to individual-level data about media exposure, which enables us to assess these relationships in the light of the content that young citizens reported having been exposed to.

The *survey* was carried out in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, between June 2 and June 20, 2005, among Dutch adults aged 18–24. In order to maximize representativity of the sample, the survey was conducted among eligible voters varying in age (within the 7-year range), level of education, study discipline or work situation, and geographical region of residence. Paper-and-pen questionnaires were handed out face to face on a variety of locations, including lecture rooms, workplaces such as offices, shops, factory canteens, urban shopping centers, beach boulevards, cafés, and finally, near a football stadium prior to a football match. Individual or institutional consent was obtained in advance of the study. A total number of 720 young adults properly completed the questionnaire. The participation rate was 70.0%. We do not claim to have a sample that is fully representative of the young population, but we do have considerable variation in terms of age, gender, and education, which is in line with census data. Moreover, we stress that other modes of data collection (including CATI or CAWI) often produces sample biases, especially in this age group (Dillman, 2000).

The *dependent variables* were political cynicism and voting No. Political cynicism was measured using a slightly adjusted measure derived from Cappella and Jamieson (1997), which is a three-item index tapping cynicism at the level of campaigns and politicians. The following three items, measured on a 5-point agree/disagree scale, were used: (1) the politicians were open and honest during the campaign, (2) the campaign about the European Constitution was more about strategy than content, and (3) the campaign gave me sufficient information to make a qualified choice. Propositions 1 and 3 were reversely coded. Subsequently, the items were added and divided by 3 to form an appropriate political cynicism scale ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.67$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$). Voting No was tapped using a self-reported measure following a filter question tapping participation in the referendum: In case you voted in the Dutch 2005 European Constitution referendum, what did you vote? Respondents' answers were dichotomized into a *No vote* (1) and a *Yes or blank vote* (0).¹

News media exposure is the key *independent variable*. We assessed exposure and attention to referendum coverage in the television and newspaper outlets included in the study. Slater (2004) has argued that attention is intrinsically entangled with "prior variables" such as political interest, arguing that "[w]eighting exposure by attention might produce effects that are primarily due to attention's antecedents, not exposure" (p. 174). However, because we are querying respondents about cynicism on a fairly specific topic, we found it important to not only consider overall news exposure but also attention to news about the referendum issue (see Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986).² Therefore, we use combined indices of exposure and attention to the selected news outlets as independent variables. Given the high degree of similarity in terms of strategic reporting about the referendum in the press (see the following results), it was appropriate to compute an overall press exposure index plus attention to news about the referendum issue. For television, we included measures of exposure to individual outlets. As stated above, to interpret the effects of these media exposure variables in our model, we draw on the content analysis that

provides detailed information about the news content to which respondents were exposed.

In all analyses, we control for political interest, political efficacy, trust in political institutions, government evaluation, and sociodemographics age, gender, and education. In our analysis of a No vote, we additionally control for ideology, euro-skepticism (six-item index, $\alpha = .67$), national economic expectations, interpersonal communication about the referendum, and political cynicism. For a theoretical explication of the importance of these control variables, see de Vreese and Semetko (2004). The descriptive statistics for all independent variables and specific wording of all items are omitted for reasons of space constraint and can be obtained from the authors. The specified regression models are an ordinary least squares model for the political cynicism index and a logistic regression model for the dichotomous No vote measure.

Content analysis

To assess the level of strategic framing in the news coverage of the referendum campaign, we rely on a quantitative content analysis of both television news and newspapers appearing during the past 6 weeks (or 42 days) of the campaign, between April 21 and June 1, 2005. The selection of television outlets included the two most widely watched daily evening television news programs in The Netherlands: the 8 o'clock *NOS Journaal* (8.00–8.25 p.m.), produced by public broadcasting organization NOS and aired on the public station Netherlands 1, and *RTL Nieuws* (7.30–7.55 p.m.) on the private channel RTL 4. We furthermore included the public television current affairs and politics magazine *Nova* (at the time of the campaign on Netherlands 3, 10.20–10.55 p.m.), which is one of the main public affairs programs on Dutch television and broadcast daily except Sundays. A total of 157 referendum campaign news stories were coded from these three television outlets. Second, six national daily newspapers with the highest circulation and readership numbers were included: *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant*, *Trouw*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Telegraaf*, and the free paper *Metro*. All newspapers appear daily except Sundays, apart from *de Telegraaf*, which appears 7 days a week. A total of 1,093 referendum-related press articles were content analyzed. The total sample of news outlets includes the country's main political information sources. The two main evening news broadcasts, NOS and RTL, were the most frequently used news media in our young voter sample (with an average exposure of about three times a week), followed by newspapers (from hardly any exposure for some papers to twice a week for others), and current affairs program *Nova* (less than once a week on average).

The content analysis was conducted by five coders at The Amsterdam School of Communications Research—ASCoR. Coding meetings were held frequently for training and supervision, and the codebook was finalized after initial training and feedback. All news stories specifically dealing with topics related to the referendum campaign or the European Constitution were content analyzed via a number of measures of strategic news framing of the referendum. We rely on Cappella and

Jamieson's (1997, p. 33) five "indicators" of strategic news: (a) a focus on key campaign actors' style or presentation; (b) analysis of key campaign actors' actions that were taken in order improve or consolidate positions, for example in the political arena or public opinion; (c) use of language or metaphors generally associated with sports, competition, games, or war; (d) an emphasis on opinion polls; and (e) the labeling of politicians either as winners or losers. An initial coder test, following training, yielded satisfactory results on these items, and a subsequent intercoder reliability test, performed on a randomly selected subset of 20 newspaper stories from the included news outlets, yielded Cohen's kappa coefficients ranging from .60 to 1.00 for these measures.³

Results

We first turn to the content of the different news media outlets to investigate the level of strategy framed news coverage. The results of the content analysis of the television and newspaper coverage of the referendum campaign are shown in Table 1. The referendum was highly visible in the news during the final 6 weeks of the campaign with 157 referendum news stories aired in key television news shows (averaging about a story daily in the NOS and RTL newscasts and two stories in each *Nova* broadcast), whereas a total of 1,093 were published in the largest national newspapers. Almost two thirds of referendum news stories on *NOS Journaal* reported about the presentation and style of politicians' performances on the political stage,

Table 1 Strategic News Coverage of the Referendum

	NOS (<i>n</i> = 43)	RTL (<i>n</i> = 37)	Nova (<i>n</i> = 77)	Press (<i>n</i> = 1,093)
Strategy 1: Focus on politicians' presentation and/or style	.63 (27)	.46 (17)	.31 (24)	.35 (381)
Strategy 2: Focus on politicians' actions aimed at augmenting public support	.58 (25)	.43 (16)	.06 (05)	.17 (182)
Strategy 3: Focus on winning and/or losing	.02 (01)	—	.01 (01)	.03 (28)
Strategy 4: Reference to polls or public opinion	.42 (18)	.49 (18)	.26 (20)	.15 (171)
Strategy 5: Use of language from war or sports	.49 (21)	.46 (17)	.26 (20)	.19 (186)

Note: Indicators of strategic news about the referendum (on a scale from 0 to 1) during the final 6 weeks of the campaign between April 21 and June 1, 2005 (with the absolute counts in parentheses). Given that the share of strategically framed news content did not differ notably between the newspapers, we present one additive measure for the press and use this measure in subsequent analyses.

whereas this was less than half on *RTL Nieuws* and about one third in *Nova*. The NOS also focused comparatively most (58%) on the actions being taken by political actors in order to enhance or consolidate a politically favorable position, followed by RTL (43%) and, with far less references, *Nova* (6%). Television news hardly referred to politicians in terms of winners or losers. In relative terms, RTL reported most about opinion polls, slightly more than NOS, and almost two times more than *Nova*. Finally, both NOS and RTL used sports and war type metaphors in about half of all referendum stories, whereas this sort of expressions was only present in roughly a quarter of all *Nova* items.

In the press, there were no major differences between the newspapers. All papers focused, in about one third of the reports, on the presentation and style of politicians' performances in the political process. Emphasis on actions taken by politicians aimed at augmenting public support was present in 17% of the coverage. Newspapers scarcely referred to political actors as either winners or losers. References to opinion polls were made in roughly 15% of the stories, whereas in about one in five stories, language with strong connotations to games and war was used. The press coverage showed a high degree of similarity and an overall modest level of strategy coverage compared to television news.

To test the effects of mediated campaign communication, we conducted an analysis to explain political cynicism. Hypothesis 1 predicted that exposure to outlets reporting more strategically has a stronger positive effect on cynicism than exposure to outlets reporting less strategically. Table 2 shows three regression models examining political cynicism as the criterion variable.⁴ Whereas the demographic controls in Model 1 explain no variance, the predispositions included in Model 2 show robust and significant relationships with political cynicism. Although political interest ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$) and, in this model, education ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$) are both positively associated with cynicism, political efficacy ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .01$), trust in political institutions ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$), and a positive evaluation of the incumbent government ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .01$) are all negatively correlated with cynicism. The second model accounts for 9.8% of the variance. Model 3 shows that, after these controls, media use contributed an additional 4%. We found that exposure to the main national evening television news bulletins, the public NOS ($\beta = .12$, $p < .01$) and private RTL ($\beta = .08$, $p < .05$), yielded significant positive associations with political cynicism. In contrast, both the *Nova* and the press exposure measures proved insignificant cynicism predictors.⁵ The correlations between both education and political interest and political cynicism as established in Model 2, however, lost significance in the final model. Taking the findings of the content analysis into consideration, these results confirm our first hypothesis about the conditional positive association between exposure to news about the referendum in "strategy rich" news contexts and levels of political cynicism among young citizens.

Finally, we conducted an analysis to explain young voters' referendum vote choices. Table 3 displays the full model predicting a No vote.⁶ Our results show that cynicism about the referendum campaign had a positive and significant effect on

Table 2 Effects of Strategic News Coverage on Political Cynicism

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β (SE)
Sociodemographics			
Age	0.05	0.03	0.01 (0.01)
Gender (male)	-0.02	-0.03	-0.04 (0.05)
Education	0.01	0.10*	0.07 (0.04)
Predispositions			
Political interest	—	0.13***	0.01 (0.03)
Political efficacy	—	-0.11**	-0.13** (0.03)
Trust in political institutions	—	-0.18***	-0.22*** (0.02)
Government approval rating	—	-0.13**	-0.11** (0.01)
Campaign variables			
Public TV news exposure and attention	—	—	0.12** (0.01)
Private TV news exposure and attention	—	—	0.08* (0.01)
Public TV current affairs exposure and attention	—	—	0.07 (0.02)
Press exposure and attention	—	—	0.06 (0.01)
Adjusted <i>R</i> -square	.00	.09	.14
Incremental <i>R</i> -square (%)	—	9.8***	4.0***
<i>N</i>	710	694	663

Note: Ordinary least squares regression.

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

voting No ($B = .42, p < .05$). Thus, young voters holding negative sentiments toward the campaign and the campaigning politicians tended to vote No. This finding confirms our second hypothesis. With regard to the predisposition measures, we found euroskepticism to be the most powerful predictor of voting No ($B = 1.56, p < .001$). Also, trust in political institutions showed a strong negative association with a No vote ($B = -.63, p < .001$). Ideology was found to be a moderate predictor of the vote, with a left political leaning (relative to the political center) positively correlating with voting No ($B = .58$), albeit at a relatively weak level of significance ($p < .10$), whereas the positive association between a ideological preference for right (comparative to the political center) and a No vote did not attain significance. Last, turning to the sociodemographics, education was found to have a significantly strong negative effect on voting No ($B = -.65, p < .001$).

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between exposure to strategic news reporting and political cynicism and voting behavior among young voters in a referendum.

Table 3 Influence of Campaign Effects on Voting No

	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Exp (<i>B</i>)
Constant	1.20 (2.10)	
Sociodemographics		
Age	−0.06 (0.07)	0.95
Gender (male)	−0.09 (0.26)	0.91
Education	−0.65*** (0.18)	0.52
Predispositions		
Political interest	−0.00 (0.19)	1.00
Political efficacy	0.20 (0.15)	1.22
Trust in political institutions	−0.63*** (0.13)	0.53
Euroskepticism	1.56*** (0.26)	4.76
Left ideological leaning	0.58 [#] (0.32)	1.79
Right ideological leaning	0.37 (0.33)	1.44
Government approval rating	−0.11 (0.07)	0.90
National economic expectations	−0.17 (0.18)	0.85
Campaign variables		
Interpersonal communication about referendum	0.04 (0.16)	1.04
Political cynicism	0.42* (0.21)	1.53
Public television news exposure and attention	−0.01 (0.06)	0.99
Private television news exposure and attention	0.03 (0.05)	1.03
Public current affairs program exposure and attention	−0.02 (0.10)	0.98
Press exposure and attention	−0.01 (0.07)	0.99
−2 log likelihood	426.47	
Nagelkerke pseudo <i>R</i> square	.54	
Cases correctly classified	78.1	
<i>N</i>	493	

Note: Logistic regression.

[#]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

We examined the nature of these relationships while linking our media use measures to indicators of actual media content so as to provide more compelling interpretations of our findings. We found evidence of the hypothesized relationship between exposure to strategically framed campaign coverage and political cynicism in the context of a referendum campaign. We extend the literature to also demonstrate how cynicism is additionally related to voting No. This suggests that cynicism served as an intervening factor in the relationship between a media exposure and a No vote. In other words, mediated campaign communication affected young citizens' vote choices in the referendum, depending on how cynical an attitude was adopted toward the campaign and campaigning politicians.

Our results confirmed the expectation that young voters who were most exposed to strategically framed campaign news displayed the highest levels of political cynicism. The important conditional factor for establishing this positive relationship, however, is the level of strategy framing in the news. Exposure to mediated campaign coverage in which the strategy frame was relatively less pervasive showed only weak associations with cynicism. These findings dovetail with those of de Vreese (2005), who showed that the news media's influence on levels of political cynicism depends upon the relative presence of strategy in the news. We conclude, therefore, that young adults are susceptible to cynicism in largely similar ways; that is, only when exposed to news that passes "a critical threshold of strategic reporting" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 295). This does bring into question earlier popular and scholarly accounts, both those that stipulate sweeping across-the-board effects of strategic news and those who portray young citizens as novices in public affairs who are bound to lapse into political disaffection when merely exposed to political news.

Indeed, our findings suggest that, when pertinent media content and audience characteristics are considered, young voters do not show more vulnerability to media-induced cynicism than older voters. Likewise, the structure of young citizens' cynical feelings about politics and campaigns shares more similarities with "the average citizen" than differences. We found that young citizens' feelings of political efficacy were strongly and reversely related to their levels of political cynicism. This result is not only commonsensical but also in line with Pinkleton and Austin (2001, 2002) and de Vreese (2004, 2005), who previously found evidence of this negative association. In addition, our analysis showed that government approval was a robustly negative context-bound predictor of cynicism, which is in line with previous studies that have identified a reverse relationship between incumbent government satisfaction and cynicism about politics (e.g., Erber & Lau, 1990), and corroborates the findings of an earlier referendum study by de Vreese and Semetko (2002).

The study gets at the underlying question of exactly how detrimental the effects of strategic and negative news coverage on the political attitudes of young and (therefore) inexperienced citizens may turn out to be. Although the relationship we established between strategy news and cynicism might in fact be interpreted as a sign of media malaise, such an interpretation would not only imply that public cynicism is democratically undesirable *per se* but also that these effects have subsequent critical consequences for the younger public's engagement with political and democratic processes. These accounts, however, conflict with, for example, previous studies reporting a positive link between political cynicism and political sophistication (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2004, 2005). Although we emphasize that more research on the construct's multidimensionality and measurement is needed, cynicism, as conceived in this line of research, is perhaps mostly reflective of an interested and critical public stance toward politics, which can arguably be seen as rather healthy for a democracy. Moreover, a number of studies specifically looking at political participation among young voters, including our own,⁷ did *not* find a negative connection between political cynicism and voter abstention (Austin &

Pinkleton, 1995; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Rubenson, Blais, Fournier, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004), which suggests that the conventional assumption that today's younger generations are less likely to vote mainly because they are so cynical about politics lacks compelling evidence.⁸ Evidently, at the same time, we need to beware generalizations about cynicism and young voter (de)mobilization, as different effects may emerge in countries with distinct political and media systems and cultures.

It is important to note, however, that we only analyzed young citizens' traditional *news* media use, and, therefore, our findings tell us little about the potential effects of nonhard news formats such as, for example, political infotainment and soft news. Recent research takes conflicting perspectives on the contribution of these formats to the public's involvement with politics (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Moy et al., 2005; Pfau et al., 2007; Prior, 2005). Nonetheless, future studies ought to examine young people's overall media use patterns, thus taking into consideration exposure to a broader variety of media outlets available in a given media marketplace. Quite conceivably, the important condition for malign media effects, if indeed extant, may not so much be whether young people are exposed to news that is framed in terms of political strategy and electoral gaming or in terms of issues, but rather whether young people do tune in to the news at all or refer to entertainment media instead. Accordingly, it might be expected that those young people who routinely avoid exposure to mainstream hard news sources such as television news and newspapers are most susceptible to getting stuck in a downward cycle of political disaffection and apathy (see Aarts & Semetko, 2003).

Furthermore, for clear comparability reasons, the study hinges on measures of strategic news framing developed in earlier studies. However, the strategy frame draws on a fairly broad conceptualization, which calls for further refinement of its measures. In view of the next step, Valentino et al. (2001) conducted an initial test of the independent effects of two specific framing elements, poll results and war language, but found that neither of these elements boosted participants' strategic responses to political behavior over and beyond the effects of news stories' emphases on the underlying motivations for political actions, which Valentino et al. consider to be the "core" of the strategy frame (p. 351). Future experimental research should further explore whether or not, and if so which, single strategy elements play an independent role in fueling cynical attitudes.

On the issue of political behavior in a referendum context, we highlight the finding that political cynicism exerted a significant positive effect on voting No, despite controlling for several important predictor variables established in studies on referendum voting. We may reasonably infer from this voter behavior that a considerable share of the young constituency and, because we have no reason to believe otherwise, most likely substantial shares of the electorate as a whole, scolded the incumbent government for how it addressed the electorate during the campaign by purposely voting against the government's recommendation. The government was highly criticized for its style of Yes campaigning, which was negative and at times condescending, and partly as a result became a much discussed and highly salient

campaign issue in the news. As the Yes side steadily kept losing ground in the polls, the news media, in relative terms the NOS and RTL news broadcasts in particular (see Table 1), focused heavily on the government's meager performance and miserably failing strategies in order to turn the tide and persuade a growingly skeptical voting public to approve treaty ratification.

On a final note, there is also an important caveat to consider, which concerns the chicken-and-egg problem inherent to any study relying on cross-sectional survey data. Strictly speaking, our study does not allow for drawing firm conclusions about the direction of causality in these relationships, as we cannot establish individual *change* in political cynicism and vote choice. However, though we cannot discard the possibility that, first, those young citizens who are politically cynical to begin with prefer news with higher levels of strategic content, this alternative interpretation is less plausible in the light of previous research, which suggests that political disaffection does not so much enhance selectivity of news exposure, but rather discourages, or at least correlates negatively with, news media use *overall* (Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). Moreover, assessing the established relationships between strategic news exposure and political cynicism in the light of the actual news content that young citizens reported being exposed to validates our interpretation of these relationships in terms of genuine media effects. And though we, second, are also unable to refute that prior No vote intentions drove attitudes of cynicism, this alternative explanation seems less likely given the large share of undecided young voters a month before the referendum,⁹ and the comfortable lead of the Yes camp in the polls before the campaign had properly started.¹⁰ Quite the reverse, this suggests that an important part of public opinion on the referendum issue crystallized into a No vote propensity during the campaign *and*, as we find, *because* of the campaign.

We have shown in this study that news media matter in determining the outcome of a referendum, although concurrently exploring the effects of a mediated campaign among young voters specifically. Clearly, further research is needed to better understand the effects of political campaigns on young citizens' attitudes and electoral behavior and also of referendum campaigns in general. Very importantly, we add to this that no study is able to wholly understand the dynamics of a referendum campaign without thoroughly taking into account its mediated information environment.

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Notes

- 1 The actual turnout in the referendum was 63.3%, and our sample of young voters reported a turnout of 73.2%. Respondent overreporting of voting is frequently observed in electoral research (Belli, Traugott, Young, & McGonagle, 1999), and we acknowledge the limitations of using self-report voting measures (see Bernstein, Chadha, & Montjoy, 2001; Leshner & Thorson, 2000). The 10 percentage-point

- difference between the reported survey data and the actual turnout nevertheless corresponds to that of other national election and referendum studies (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991).
- 2 We note that using exposure measures that are not weighted by attention yields very similar outcomes.
 - 3 The intercoder agreements on each of the strategic news frame indicators were as follows, respectively: an emphasis on opinion polls, $\kappa = 1.00$; a focus on key campaign actors' style or presentation, $\kappa = .66$; analysis of key campaign actors' actions that were taken in order improve or consolidate positions, $\kappa = .60$; use of language associated with sports, competition, games, or war, $\kappa = .69$; and the labeling of politicians either as winners or losers, $\kappa = 1.00$.
 - 4 Omission of cases due to listwise exclusion of missing data accounts for the drop in the number of respondents included in the subsequent models.
 - 5 We also specified a model predicting political cynicism with exposure measures that were weighted both according to the individual and combined presence of the various strategy news indicators in the included outlets' news contents reported in Table 1. The results were highly similar to those reported in Table 2.
 - 6 The number of respondents included in the model ($n = 493$) is considerably lower compared with our original sample ($n = 720$), given that, clearly, it only includes the number of respondents that reported having voted in the referendum, whereas, in addition, some cases are omitted due to listwise exclusion of missing data.
 - 7 We ran a separate analysis of participation in the referendum, testing for the influence of political cynicism while controlling for a number of relevant control variables. Cynicism was unrelated to turnout ($B = .06, p < .72$), which suggests that voters who adopted a relatively cynical attitude during the campaign did not show any signs of political apathy or demobilization.
 - 8 This leaves unanswered the question as to why, according to a good deal of recent aggregate level research, levels of political awareness and engagement of today's young voters contrast so unfavorably with those of not only today's older generations but, more importantly, also young generations before them. Undoubtedly, the explanation partially pertains to the economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances that younger generations of citizens have grown up under (see Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006)
 - 9 In our sample, more than 56% of the respondents reported being undecided on how to vote a month before referendum day. Over 32% of young voters decided in the past 2 weeks, whereas an additional 24% did not decide until the very last couple of days, or even the day of the referendum, on how to vote.
 - 10 For example, an Interview-NSS/*Nova* opinion poll, conducted about 6 weeks prior to the referendum (April 15, 2005), reported that among decided voters the Yes side was leading at 66% against the No side at 34%.

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