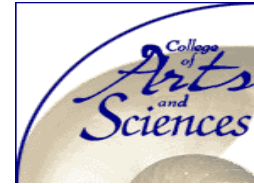


# Political Knowledge and Political Media Use Among College Students

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## Abstract

Although voter participation among U.S. citizens has been declining for a number of decades, the 2008 Presidential election evidenced a significant increase in voter participation among U.S. citizens age 18-24. Research suggests that increased media access increases an individual's perceptions of political effectiveness, potentially leading to greater voter participation. This study explored the influence of reliance on various media sources and political knowledge on voting participation among 588 college students. Results indicated that reliance on major news networks was positively related to voting participation. However, political knowledge was not significantly correlated with media source.

## Introduction

Political and social scientists have noted declines in voter participation rates over the past three decades, with particularly low rates among U.S. youth of voting age. However, the Presidential election of 2008 may represent a reversal of this trend, with increases in participation among young voters. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), participation among the 18-24 age group increased from 47% in 2004 to 49% in the 2008 election. Several theories have been presented to explain such an increase. One possible explanation includes increased access to political information. Support for this was presented by Kaid and associates (2007) who reported the results of several surveys that pointed to lack of information as being a strong cause of political apathy.

With rapidly changing technologies shaping the manner in which information is transmitted, today's youth have more opportunities than prior generations to gain knowledge about the political landscape in an instant and with the touch of a few keys. Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) found that level of confidence in the knowledge necessary to participate in the political process - what they termed political efficacy - was significantly related to voting or not voting among young voters. Research has also examined how political knowledge is related to reliance on different sources of news information. For example, Kaid and Postelnicu (2005) have demonstrated that political information efficacy was higher for undergraduate students who viewed political ads in an online format versus a televised format, although political cynicism was higher for those in the online condition. Additionally, Moy, Torres, Tanaka, and McCluskey (2005) found that media reliance increased political participation through increased knowledge, and they noted that this relationship was strongest for print sources (e.g., newspapers). The present study examined sources of political information and knowledge of the political process among college students at the time of the 2008 Presidential election.

## Method

### Participants:

As part of a larger study, 588 students from a Southeastern campus completed pre-election and post-election surveys. The sample was largely female (66.4%), Caucasian/White (71.4%), 35.3% Evangelical Protestant, and 41.4% Republican. The gender and racial/ethnic distributions obtained were representative of the campus population, and the religious and political party distributions were representative of the surrounding region from which the student body was drawn.

### Procedures:

Following IRB approval, packets of survey measures were distributed among 15 classrooms varying in size, subject, and major in the six weeks prior to the 2008 general election. In the three weeks following the election, students were given a brief follow-up survey that asked whether or not they cast a ballot in the presidential election; 378 (70.1%) follow-up surveys were obtained.

### Measures:

Included in the pre-election survey were demographic questions, a question asking participants how likely they were to vote in the upcoming election on a scale of 1 to 7, and a ten-item, multiple choice measure (with four response options per item) created by the authors to assess students' knowledge of the political process. Items were drawn from the U.S. citizenship test and included questions such as "How many senators does each state get?" and "What percent is necessary for veto override?" Participants also rated how often they used eight different media sources for their political information on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to very often.

## Results

### Knowledge

Voter turnout rates were high at 75.9% for the overall sample. On average, participants scored 7.7 ( $SD = 1.7$ ) correct on the ten-item measure of political knowledge. Performance on individual knowledge items ranged from as low as 40% correct to as high as 96% correct. Nearly 60% of students scored at or above a pass/fail cutoff of 70% correct on the knowledge measure. Using this cutoff, significant differences were found in voter turnout rates,  $\chi^2(1, N = 398) = 5.89, p = .02$ , with 80% of high scoring students reporting that they voted in the election while only 70% of low scorers reporting that they voted. T-test comparisons also indicated a significant difference between voters and non-voters on the knowledge measure with voters scoring an average of 7.88 correct and non-voters scoring an average of 7.27 correct ( $t = -3.25, p = .001$ ). There was not a significant difference in knowledge score or proportion of high scorers as a function of party affiliation (i.e., Democrat, Republican, Independent).

## Results (continued)

### Media Source

Participants' use of media sources for political information varied, with television sources cited as the most frequently used (Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Frequency Ratings of Media Sources of Political Information

	Mean	SD
News-only TV stations (e.g., CNN, Fox News, MSNBC)	3.26	1.18
Major network news (e.g., ABC, CBS, NBC)	3.21	1.11
Comedy shows (e.g., The Daily Show, The Colbert Report)	2.53	1.34
Major news-only network websites	2.46	1.20
Newspapers	2.45	1.15
Radio shows	2.45	1.21
News magazines (e.g., Time, Newsweek)	2.07	1.11
Internet blogs	1.80	1.07

The following media sources were positively correlated with intention to vote in the upcoming election ( $p < .01$ ): major network news ( $r = 0.13$ ), news-only TV stations ( $r = 0.18$ ), major news-only network websites ( $r = 0.13$ ), news magazines ( $r = 0.14$ ), and radio shows ( $r = 0.12$ ). Use of comedy shows for news was negatively correlated with vote intention ( $r = -0.11$ ). In examining whether or not students actually voted in the election, only use of news-only TV stations (e.g., CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) was significantly related to voting in the election (3.36 for those who voted versus 3.06 for those who didn't,  $p = 0.05$ ). Score on the political knowledge quiz was not significantly correlated with use of any of the eight media sources.

## Discussion

The majority of college students displayed a "passing" level of basic knowledge of the political process. However, analyses of individual items showed some gaps. Approximately 40% of participants did not know who would be elevated to the position of President in the event of the death of the President and Vice President.

## Discussion (continued)

Nearly 60% of participants were unable to identify the political party in control of Congress at pre-election. This later question was unique on the quiz in that it was the only question assessing current political holding and not procedural knowledge, and it may be that college students are better at procedural questions that can be answered from knowledge gained in civics courses that do not require paying attention to current political events.

Television media sources were more frequently reported as sources of political information than were internet and print media. Additionally, those who voted in the election were more likely to report getting their political news from news-only TV stations. However, we did not find the hypothesized relationship between media use and political knowledge. This may be because our knowledge quiz contained mostly procedural questions. Perhaps the media are less concerned with informing citizens on the process of legislation and are more concerned with informing citizens on who to vote for. This would explain the relationship between use of news-only TV networks and voting, as the 24-hour news networks tend to have clear partisan loyalties.

Future studies might better examine this relationship. Do people get their political information from the media, or do they seek media that reinforces their pre-existing political views? It would have been worthwhile for us to have included a question pertaining to when students obtained their political information. Is most political knowledge sought around presidential elections, and do these people continue to use the media for political news in non-election years?

Also of interest was the negative relationship between use of comedy shows for political news and intention to vote. Comedy shows like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report are popular among the college student demographic. These shows poke fun at the political process through the use of video clips and satire, and in light of our results, it appears that they may cultivate feelings of distrust for the political process that result in lower intention to participate in this process. However, a relationship was not found between use of comedy shows and whether or not the student actually voted in the election.

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