VOTING

...in Biased Media Environments

by Lukas Stoetzer, Election Researcher and Professor of Quantitative Methods at the Department of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University

Elections are the foundation of modern representative democracies. When you, as a citizen of a representative democracy, vote, you make sure that your opinions are considered in the democratic process. As campaigns progress, parties and candidates actively compete for your vote, promoting policies they promise to carry out. Your choice in the elections is critical, as it directly impacts how different opinions are represented and weighted in the political process.

The media environment plays an important role in shaping democratic representation. Consider where you get your information about politics. A vast share of voters now finds their information online, through social media platforms and online newspaper outlets. Recent research shows that a majority of the content people see on these platforms comes from 'like-minded' sources, and people select online news outlets based on their prior convictions. This is likely the case for you as well. When you go online, you might find yourself in a biased media environment.

These media environments do more than neutrally inform you as a voter about politics. They provide arguments in social media posts, podcasts, and newspaper editorials about why you should support or oppose specific policies. Additionally, media environments focus on certain issues while neglecting others, guiding your attention and influencing the general debate.

These processes may have an impact on how you vote. The academic literature categorizes media effects on voting as processes of information, persuasion, and priming. Being informed about a party's positions might help you find a better match than you had initially considered. Exposure to arguments concerning an issue might persuade you to reconsider your stance, leading you to choose alternatives that align more closely with your views. Furthermore, priming can shift your focus towards specific issues while causing you to overlook others.

But does exposure to an unbalanced share of arguments about issues affect your voting decision at the ballot? To find out, we conducted a survey experiment where we presented respondents with a set of arguments about a specific policy. One policy we focused on during the last German Federal Election was the re-introduction of a wealth tax—which parties on the left supported (SPD, the Greens, Left Party), while parties on the right opposed it (CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD). There are valid reasons to support either side of the issue, and arguments from either side may shift one's views on the matter. However, it is not always clear how far these arguments shape decisions, not just opinions.

We randomly presented respondents with either arguments in favor of a wealth tax, counterarguments, or a balanced set of arguments on the issue. The arguments in favor contained statements from editorials on the issue, for example: "Currently, workers are disproportionately burdened while the rich and wealthy are not." Afterwards, we asked respondents to choose between two hypothetical candidates holding positions on a set of policy issues (introducing comprehensive school, allowing family reunification, maintaining a CO2 tax, re-introducing a wealth tax, and retaining the COVID mask requirement). Comparing the share of respondents who chose a candidate in favor of the reintroduction of the wealth tax among the different groups allowed us to study the influence of argument exposure on voting.

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Exposure to a biased set of policy arguments can influence voting. In the case where respondents received only pro-arguments, 58% supported the candidate in favor of a wealth tax. In the counterargument case, it was only 51%. A 7%-point difference can have a decisive impact in a two-candidate race. The support among respondents who received a balanced set of arguments was 56%.

One result from our research is that a balanced media environment, where respondents read both sides of the issue, does not significantly influence voting decisions. We studied additional policy issues during the pandemic and the German federal election and found that while respondents in the confronted with arguments in favor of an issue are 3% more likely to choose a candidate who supports the issues, respondents in the counter-group are 3% less likely. We found no difference between respondents exposed to a balanced set of arguments compared to those who received no arguments at all.

These findings reveal the conditions for media effects on voting. In a biased media environment that presents a skewed sample of arguments on specific issues, people are more likely to support candidates that side with the position of the arguments because they are persuaded to take this side of the issue and also focus on the issue. For you, this process might be quite unconscious, but the discussions about policy that take place in these outlets can nonetheless affect the way you form your opinions and what issues you deem important.

The insights from our research have far-reaching implications when we think about representation and media together more broadly. It is important to offer citizens the possibility to get a balanced view from media outlets about a variety of issues to make informed decisions. These aspects are particularly important in ever-evolving digital media environments, where algorithms decide about the exposure to different issues. Digital media platforms should be aware of the potential distorting effects algorithms have not just on user experience but also on the key institutions that link citizens' viewpoints to the electoral process.

Being wary of the distorting media effects on voting is important for you as a citizen. In addition to ensuring that your media environment is not too biased, digital tools can help you receive neutral information about politics. A useful digital tool to discover which parties match your viewpoints are Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), like the Wahl-O-Mat in Germany. You can go through a detailed list of issues and state your opinions on which policies should or should not be implemented. Based on your answers, the Wahl-O-Mat calculates which parties are most in line with your views—a great way to find the right party to represent your interests in the political arena. This approach essentially makes finding the right choice to have your opinions represented in politics a little simpler.

→ Wahl-o-mat (Germany)

Lukas Stötzer is Professor of Quantitative Methods at the Department of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University. His fields of research include political sociology and democracy research, political opinion formation, the positioning of political parties, and election forecasting.