

Digital Media Exposure and First-Time Voter Choice Certainty: A Review of Political Identity, Start-Up Costs, and the Role of Politainment

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Abstract: *The digital media environment has fundamentally transformed how first-time voters engage with politics, offering both opportunities for increased campaign participation and challenges for acquiring factual political knowledge. This review synthesizes contemporary research on the relationship between digital media exposure and vote choice certainty among emerging adults (ages 18–29), examining how digital "politainment" interacts with voting start-up costs, political identity formation, and cultural context. Drawing on the habitual voting framework, social distraction hypothesis, and gateway theory, we analyse empirical evidence from computational social science, panel studies, and cross-cultural analyses. Results indicate that while social media exposure significantly increases vote choice certainty for first-time voters through active campaign participation, it may simultaneously create an "illusion of knowledge" without improving factual political understanding. The effectiveness of digital politainment as a gateway for resource-poor individuals is deeply contingent upon cultural resources, political regime type, and media literacy. We conclude that securing the future of habitual voting requires leveraging media's eudaimonic potential while fostering political literacy to ensure high-quality participation.*

Keywords: digital media, first-time voters, vote choice certainty, politainment, political socialization, habitual voting

1. Introduction

The Crisis of Turnout and the Evolution of the Electorate
Electoral participation across Western democracies has undergone a significant contraction since its peak in the 1970s, with the crux of this democratic crisis lying within the behaviour of the first-time voter (Plutzer, 2002). Research on electoral participation emphasizes that voting is a habit formed during the initial elections of one's adult life, and failure to participate early can lead to persistent political inequality throughout an individual's lifetime (Plutzer, 2002; Bhatti et al., 2016). First-time voters face high "start-up" costs which have increased since the 1980s as traditional social cleavages and collective resources have eroded creating a significant participation divide that disproportionately affects resource-poor individuals (Plutzer, 2002).

In the modern era, "digital natives" represent the first generation to enter the political system with fully developed digital media routines, fundamentally changing how political information is consumed from traditional offline media to fragmented social media platforms (Ohme et al., 2018). The phase of "emerging adulthood" (ages 18–29) represents a distinct developmental window for political identity formation, during which individuals negotiate "identity exploration" (trying out various roles) and "identity commitment" (investing in a specific value set) (Ohme et al., 2018). Understanding how digital media exposure interacts with these start-up costs and identity formation processes is critical for addressing the turnout crisis and ensuring the future of democratic participation.

This review synthesizes contemporary research on digital media exposure and first-time voter choice certainty, arguing

that while digital "politainment" can serve as a gateway for the uninterested and resource-poor, its effectiveness is deeply contingent upon cultural resources and political regimes. We examine competing theoretical frameworks the social distraction hypothesis versus the gateway theory analyse cross-cultural variations in media engagement, and evaluate computational approaches using digital trace data for predicting voting behaviour.

2. Theoretical Framework: Habitual Voting, Start-Up Costs, and Participatory Resources

The Habitual Voting Framework

The decision to vote is characterized by a high degree of "inertia," where patterns of participation or abstention established during the first three eligible elections typically dictate an individual's lifelong electoral trajectory (Plutzer, 2002). This "habitual voting" framework reframes our inquiry into voter turnout by making aging the lens through which traditional resource and cost measures are viewed, offering a developmental theory of turnout that follows from the observation that most citizens are habitual voters or habitual non-voters (Plutzer, 2002).

Voting is a habit that people learn based on experience in their first few elections (Plutzer, 2002). Most young citizens start their political lives as habitual non-voters but vary in how long it takes to develop into habitual voters. With this transition at the core of the framework, previous findings concerning costs and resources can be integrated into developmental theory, providing a better understanding of the roles of aging, parenthood, partisanship, and geographic mobility (Plutzer, 2002).

Start-Up Costs and the Transition from Collective to Individual Resources

For the newly enfranchised, the act of voting is not merely a logistical hurdle but a significant cognitive investment (Plutzer, 2002). Unlike experienced voters for whom participation has become a "standing decision," first-time voters must navigate the complexities of registration, candidate platforms, and institutional mechanics from scratch (Plutzer, 2002). If these initial start-up costs are too high, they can lead to a lifetime of non-voting.

Historically, start-up costs were mitigated by "collective resources" such as union membership, church attendance, and stable party milieus that bridged the turnout gap by providing external mobilization and lowering cognitive costs (Plutzer, 2002). However, the erosion of traditional social milieus and cleavage politics has shifted the burden toward "individual resources"—formal education level, cognitive curiosity, and personal media literacy—favoring the highly educated while creating insurmountable barriers for those lacking these resources (Plutzer, 2002).

Table 1: The Transition of Participatory Resources

Resource Type	Examples	Impact on Participation	Temporal Trend
Collective Resources	Union membership, church attendance, stable party milieus	Historically bridged turnout gap by providing external mobilization and lowering cognitive costs	Declining: Traditional social anchors have eroded, leaving young voters "bowling alone"
Individual Resources	Formal education level, cognitive curiosity, personal media literacy	Favors highly educated; those lacking resources face insurmountable start-up barriers	Rising: Individual prerequisites are now primary predictors of participation

Source: Adapted from Plutzer (2002) and Ohme et al. (2018)

The consequences of this shift are most evident in the "turnout gap." In Germany during the 1980s, the predicted probability of voting for a first-time voter with low education was approximately 88%, nearly identical to that of older cohorts socialized when collective resources were prevalent (Plutzer, 2002). By the 2010s, this probability plummeted to 55% (Plutzer, 2002). This divide is far less pronounced in older citizens, who acquired the voting habit in an era of robust social mobilization, whereas modern digital natives must rely almost exclusively on individual educational attainment to overcome the "first act" threshold (Plutzer, 2002).

The Emerging Electorate: Digital Natives and Media Routines

The phase of "emerging adulthood" (ages 18–29) represents a distinct developmental window for political identity formation (Ohme et al., 2018). During this period, individuals negotiate "identity exploration" trying out various roles and "identity commitment," where they invest in a specific value set (Ohme et al., 2018). First-time voters are the first generation to enter the political system with fully developed digital media routines, showing a high inclination to receiving political information via social media platforms (Ohme et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Digital natives used social media platforms significantly more ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.27$) than experienced voters ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.29$) and offline sources significantly less ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.18$) than experienced voters ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.26$) (Ohme et al., 2018). This grand pattern of changing political information access has manifested itself over the past years, with offline media channels experiencing decline while online media become the main source for political information (Ohme et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2017).

3. Digital Media and Political Knowledge: Competing Hypotheses

The Social Distraction Hypothesis

The role of digital media in this landscape is often framed by competing hypotheses, with the social distraction hypothesis suggesting "time displacement" where consumption of

hedonic (pleasure-seeking) media consumes the time and mental energy required for civic engagement (Ohme et al., 2018). While social media platforms like Facebook provide unprecedented opportunities for news exposure, their impact on political knowledge remains contentious (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022).

Empirical studies suggest that political social media use often has no significant effect on actual factual knowledge (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022). A pre-registered meta-analysis of 76 different studies involving more than 440,000 subjects found "no observable political knowledge gains from using Facebook, Twitter, or SNS [social network sites] in general" when measuring policy-specific, campaign-related, or general political knowledge (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022). In contrast, general social media use can have a moderately negative effect on political knowledge, potentially acting as a "social distraction" (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022).

Frequent exposure to news snippets in social feeds may create an "illusion of knowledge," where users feel subjectively informed without gaining a deep cognitive understanding of complex political issues (Ohme et al., 2018). This distinction must be made between hedonic and eudaimonic (meaning-seeking) media experiences: while hedonic consumption is rarely linked to identity formation, eudaimonic experiences feeling "moved" or inspired stimulate information seeking and political interest (Ohme et al., 2018).

The Gateway Theory and Accidental Exposure

The gateway theory proposes that "soft news" and entertainment serve as low-cost entry points, lowering the threshold of engagement and providing accidental exposure to politics for the uninterested (Ohme et al., 2018). Digital politainment acts as the new "collective resource" of the 21st century: in the absence of unions or churches, accidental exposure on social networking sites (SNS) creates a low-cost entry point that mimics traditional mobilization, potentially closing the gap for resource-poor individuals (Ohme et al., 2018).

"Accidental exposure" on social media acts as a crucial equalizer in a "Permanently Online, Permanently Connected"

(POPC) state, where the digital native is subjected to a continuous stream of political cues (Ohme et al., 2018). This mimics the historical mobilization of 20th-century social milieus. Once the "first act" is achieved via these low-cost digital cues, the act becomes self-reinforcing, and the predictive power of educational resources begins to diminish as voting transitions into a habit (Ohme et al., 2018).

Social media platforms combine exposure to political information in a unique social setting, including posts from friends and followers, political actors, and original posts by news media (Ohme et al., 2018). The inclusion of information from personal contacts and political actors into personalized social media diets may be especially relevant for first-time voters, for whom traditional news media may be less able to provide information about topics relevant to this small group of the electorate (Ohme et al., 2018; Moeller et al., 2016).

4. The Role of Politainment and Political Identity Formation

Conceptualizing Politainment

The blurred lines between entertainment and information, often termed "politainment," play a critical role in the political socialization of emerging adults (Ohme et al., 2018). Politainment refers to the production of entertaining content by political actors to reach voters, blending political messages

with elements of popular culture (Cetin & Yilmaz, 2024). Entertaining media content ranging from satire like *The Daily Show* to fictional narratives can broaden horizons and lower the threshold for engaging with political topics (Ohme et al., 2018).

Today, political socialization is influenced by info(poli-)tainment, with two stages of political socialization: childhood (starting very early and lasting until 15-16 years old) and youth ages (from 15-18 until around 29 years old) (Merkovity, 2021). Information processing through infotainment means that a person will process political information through entertaining formats (Merkovity, 2021).

However, the benefits of these pathways depend on the political context. In repressive regimes, emerging adults may intentionally separate entertainment from politics to avoid perceived government propaganda (Ohme et al., 2018). There is also a persistent concern that complex issues are inaccurately depicted or that stereotypes (e.g., gender roles) are perpetuated in mainstream entertainment formats (Ohme et al., 2018).

Cross-Cultural Analysis of Media Engagement

The impact of media on political identity is mediated by the "tightness" of a culture and the openness of its political system (Ohme et al., 2018). Cultural idiosyncrasies in media use reveal significant variation across countries:

Table 2: Cross-Cultural Media Engagement and Context

Country	Tightness Score	Political Context (Democracy Index)	Freedom Score	Key Media Engagement Findings
Turkey	12.5 (Tight)	Hybrid Regime (4.09); Pol. Culture (5.00); Participation (5.00)	32 (Unfree)	Resistance to "governmental propaganda"; SNS used as alternative source for unbiased info
S. Korea	20.1 (Med)	Flawed Democracy (8.00)	83 (Free)	Collectivist national concerns; skepticism of gender portrayals and manipulation in fiction
Philippines	31.5 (Med)	Flawed Democracy (6.64)	59 (Med Free)	Influence of "celebrity politics"; engagement driven by social network ties (fandom/patronage)
Croatia	55.0 (Med)	Flawed Democracy (6.57)	85 (Free)	"Democratic malaise"; strong sense of duty to vote despite low political self-efficacy
Germany	82.9 (Loose)	Full Democracy (8.68)	94 (Free)	Rational information seeking; high media literacy; self-reflexive about time displacement

Source: Adapted from Ohme et al. (2018)

Turkey:

Emerging adults exhibit a rejective stance toward state-controlled narratives. Social media serves as a vital tool for alternative journalism, providing unbiased information that is otherwise suppressed in a hybrid regime (Ohme et al., 2018).

Philippines:

Political engagement is deeply interdependent, inspired by family and friends. Media is often a tool for "marketing" politicians through "fandom and patronage," reflecting a history of celebrity politics (Ohme et al., 2018).

South Korea:

Participants seek a balance between "meaningfulness and fun," a trait of holistic thinking. Skepticism remains high regarding the "brainwashing" potential of fiction and negative gender portrayals (Ohme et al., 2018).

Croatia:

A unique psychological state exists where digital natives feel a moral obligation to vote (duty) even while expressing

"democratic malaise" and low belief in their own efficacy to effect change (Ohme et al., 2018).

Germany:

Voters are "rational seekers" who use media to build opinions, though they are critical of the cognitive load required, which can reduce entertainment value (Ohme et al., 2018).

Candidate Strategies and risks in the Social Media Age

Candidates have responded to the POPC state by "softening" their communication. However, this carries risks including celebrity and patronage (particularly in the Philippines, where blending entertainment and politics facilitates patronage), subliminal effects and "brainwashing" fears (in South Korea and Turkey, where emerging adults' express significant fears of being emotionally lured by governmentally skewed views), and trivialization of complex issues (Ohme et al., 2018).

Research shows that political candidates increasingly utilize Twitter as a broadcast mechanism to win votes, achieving effects comparable to campaign spending (Ohme et al., 2018).

Furthermore, social media platforms allow individuals with access to first-hand information such as those physically present at major political summits to become opinion leaders by brokering information and initiating wide-scale diffusion across online networks (Ohme et al., 2018).

Vote Choice Certainty and Heuristic Decision-Making

Initial Uncertainty Among First-Time Voters

First-time voters generally start election campaigns with lower vote choice certainty than more experienced voters due to their relative inexperience (Ohme et al., 2018). Young voters are inexperienced voters and may lack guiding factors that experienced voters rely on, such as satisfaction with the incumbent government and party identification (Colwell Quarles, 1979; O'Keefe & Liu, 1980). Their first vote is furthermore part of their political socialization, which is not complete at this point (Ohme et al., 2018).

The concept of uncertainty is generally understood as having only imperfect or incomplete information available it is an individual feeling and thereby an inherently subjective evaluation (Alvarez & Franklin, 1994). Uncertainty thus understood may have significant impact on citizens' decision-making. Their vote choice certainty and thereby their ability to cast an informed vote are most important in a citizen's decision-making process (Ohme et al., 2018; Verba et al., 1995).

Social Media's Effect on Vote Choice Certainty

While mere media exposure does not necessarily reduce uncertainty, social media exposure that catalyzes active campaign participation such as using vote advice applications or engaging in online peer discussions helps young voters become more certain by Election Day (Ohme et al., 2018). Results from an 11-wave national panel study ($n = 1108$) suggest that first-time voters' social media exposure is responsible for their increase in certainty as the campaign progresses, while this effect is absent for experienced voters (Ohme et al., 2018).

The differences in the slopes of vote choice certainty indicate that first-time voters indeed have a lower starting point but show a steeper increase in vote choice certainty across the campaign period compared to experienced voters (Ohme et al., 2018). The covariance of the intercepts is significantly positive, indicating that first-time voters who had higher social media exposure at the beginning of the campaign also had higher vote certainty (Ohme et al., 2018). This relationship is almost three times stronger for first-time voters than for experienced voters (Ohme et al., 2018).

First-time voters who participate more often in campaign activities exhibit higher vote choice certainty on Election Day (Ohme et al., 2018). Active campaign participation can be an antecedent of actually turning out, and direct experiences with actors and topics of the elections may increase citizens' vote choice certainty (Ohme et al., 2018; Foot & Schneider, 2006).

Heuristic Decision-Making in Low-Information Contexts

In low-information contexts, such as local or primary elections, voters often rely on heuristics like candidate race, gender, and occupation to infer ideological positions and

quality (Li & Glerum, 2022). These heuristics are often activated by candidate attributes such as appearance, age, ethnicity, and other characteristics that are not related to leadership potential (Li & Glerum, 2022; Riggle et al., 1992).

A single picture or image of a candidate provides a tremendous amount of information about that candidate, including gender, race, and age, and often general "likableness," which immediately brings many social stereotypes into play (Riggle et al., 1992). In the case of socioeconomic level, studies indicate that voters do not necessarily consider a candidate's background to be relevant information, using it mainly to evaluate the quality of the candidate but not to influence their voting decision (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; McDermott, 2009).

Experimental data demonstrate that providing even minimal substantive information, such as candidate occupation or incumbency status, can effectively diminish reliance on these demographic stereotypes and prejudices (Li & Glerum, 2022). Digital media provides the heuristics necessary to navigate the "first act" of voting. By stimulating emotional engagement and empathy through fictional narratives, politainment reduces the cognitive load of complex political issues (Ohme et al., 2018).

Predicting Voting Behaviour Through Digital Trace Data

Computational Social Science Advancements

Advancements in computational social science allow for the prediction of voting preferences using digital trace data, such as web browsing histories and media "diet colours" (Cerina & Duch, 2020; Kosinski et al., 2013). While these traces can accurately predict sociodemographic traits like age and gender, they are currently less effective at identifying undecided voters or predicting sensitive vote choices with high precision (Cerina & Duch, 2020).

ML models trained on Facebook likes, including lifestyle-related ones, can predict if a person is Democrat or Republican, and even vote choices themselves (Kosinski et al., 2013; Cerina & Duch, 2020). Applying to the context of browsing mainly conservative (liberal) news websites may indicate support of a conservative (liberal) party (Cerina & Duch, 2020).

Partisan Slants as Proxy for Voting Preferences

Nevertheless, partisan slants in an individual's media consumption serve as a significant proxy for the voting preferences of independent or "closet" partisans who are reluctant to express traditional party identification (Ohme et al., 2018). Overall, partisan media diets based on digital trace data showed much larger overlap than that from self-reported data (Chen et al., 2020). Specifically, when using digital measures, the overlaps in media diets between partisan groups were much larger than based on self-reported data (Chen et al., 2020).

In addition, the study observed an asymmetric pattern of selective exposure between conservatives and liberals in the digital trace data, but not in the self-reported data (Chen et al., 2020). Twitter users' political ideology predicts a slant in their self-reported news media consumption (Chen et al., 2020).

We show that online news consumption follows a polarized pattern, where users' visits to news sources aligned with their own political leaning are substantially longer than their visits to other news sources (AAAI, 2018).

The POPC State and Continuous Mobilization

The shift to digital trace data (SNS interactions, browsing history) allows researchers to analyse the POPC state (Ohme et al., 2018). This connectivity represents a paradigm shift: mobilization is no longer a "periodic" event tied to election cycles but a "continuous" element of daily life (Ohme et al., 2018). This constant stream of cues provides the social "nudge" that was once provided by physical community attendance (Ohme et al., 2018).

The digitalization of information has created a hybrid media system, in which information constantly spreads across different media channels (Chadwick, 2013; Schulz, 2014). Information flows are highly interconnected between channels, and it is difficult to discern a single source of a news story (Ohme et al., 2018).

Mechanisms for Reducing Uncertainty: Political Literacy and Campaign Participation

The Critical Role of Political Literacy Education

Political literacy education is essential, as higher literacy rates among novice voters are significantly correlated with more rational, informed, and frequent participation (Atlantis-Press, 2020). The result of research shows that political information has a significant effect against political participation in regional elections, especially for novice voters (Atlantis-Press, 2020).

In other words, a systematic and sustainable pattern of education will form good political literacy (Atlantis-Press, 2020). Research also proved that political education can increase the ideological level, psychological qualities, and their usefulness in developing a better career (Atlantis-Press, 2020). Studies in Sweden and other countries noted that the influence of political education on people's political participation rates is especially significant in pre-voter children and first-time new voters (Atlantis-Press, 2020).

Campaign Participation as Vicarious Experience

Following campaign developments via media is one way for voters to engage in an upcoming election. Another, maybe more important way is to participate in campaign activities that go beyond merely following media (Ohme et al., 2018). We define campaign participation as acts that are specifically related to an upcoming election and fulfil the function of additional information intake and processing as well as interpersonal communication about and campaigning for a candidate or party (Ohme et al., 2018; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

Active campaign participation can be an antecedent of actually turning out, and direct experiences with actors and topics of the elections may increase citizens' vote choice certainty (Ohme et al., 2018; Austin & Nelson, 1993). Media may play an important role in fostering active participation in campaign activities, and studies confirm differential media effects on campaign participation (Ohme et al., 2018; Aldrich et al., 2016; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

Active involvement in small activities during a campaign may be particularly helpful for first-time voters in forming their vote choice, because they are in direct contact with the election, candidates, or topics that are new to them (Ohme et al., 2018). Because first-time voters have no previous election and voting experience, active campaign participation might work for them as a vicarious experience, increasing their efficacious feeling to be certain about their vote choice (Ohme et al., 2018; Bandura, 1989).

Social media exposure can mobilize citizens to actively participate in a campaign (Ohme et al., 2018; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2013; Kahne et al., 2013). Previous studies have found a reinforcing effect of political social media exposure on active campaign participation (Ohme, 2017; Dimitrova et al., 2014). Studies that look at media effects during election campaigns mostly distinguish between information received online and offline, with little research examining if the social environment political information is received in on social media has a special function for citizens' formation of vote choice (Ohme et al., 2018).

5. Conclusion: Synthesizing Media Impact and Political Inequality

The digital media environment offers both opportunities and challenges for the newest members of the electorate. The evidence suggests a dual role for digital media: while it potentially exacerbates inequality by rewarding those with high media literacy, it also serves as the only modern mechanism capable of replacing the "collective resources" of the past (Ohme et al., 2018; Plutzer, 2002). Digital politainment by providing accidental exposure and lowering start-up costs—acts as a gateway for the resource-poor (Ohme et al., 2018).

However, the "gateway" is culturally dependent. In full democracies like Germany, media facilitates rational exploration (Ohme et al., 2018). In unfree or hybrid regimes like Turkey, the same formats are viewed with profound suspicion, potentially leading to a "rejective" identity (Ohme et al., 2018). To secure the future of the habitual voter, we must leverage the eudaimonic potential of media to ensure that the "first act" of participation is not just a logistical possibility, but a meaningful commitment (Ohme et al., 2018).

While social media can increase campaign engagement and vote choice certainty for first-time voters through active participation, it may also distract from the acquisition of factual political knowledge, creating an "illusion of knowledge" without deep cognitive understanding (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022; Ohme et al., 2018). Effective representation in modern democracies increasingly depends on providing voters with substantive information to overcome biased heuristics and fostering political literacy to ensure high-quality participation (Li & Glerum, 2022; Ohme et al., 2018).

The permanently online, permanently connected state represents a fundamental transformation in how political mobilization occurs, shifting from periodic election-cycle events to continuous daily engagement (Ohme et al., 2018). This constant stream of cues provides the social "nudge" that

was once provided by physical community attendance, mimicking historical mobilization patterns through digital channels (Ohme et al., 2018).

Future research should continue to examine the conditional effects of digital media exposure across different cultural contexts, political regimes, and levels of media literacy. Interventions aimed at increasing first-time voter participation should focus on reducing start-up costs through simplified registration processes, providing substantive candidate information to reduce heuristic reliance, and developing political literacy education programs that emphasize critical evaluation of digital media content. Only through such comprehensive approaches can democracies ensure that digital natives become habitual voters who participate meaningfully in democratic processes.

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