

A Review of Meta-Analyses and Theory on the Effects of Political Communication on Electoral Behavior and Polarization

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Abstract. The study of political communication has undergone exponential expansion, generating a vast body of literature with often divergent conclusions about citizen competence, susceptibility to elite influence, and the determinants of electoral behavior. This paper presents a systematic review and meta-analysis of key empirical research in this field, aiming to synthesize the accumulated evidence on the effects of framing, negative campaigning, candidate characteristics, and the rise of digital media. Through a critical analysis of the methodologies employed, from experimental designs to aggregate data analysis, the robustness and generalizability of the findings are evaluated. The results indicate that while the effects of political communication are real, their magnitude is often limited and highly contextual. For example, framing effects are moderate on attitudes but almost nil on behavior. Similarly, voter turnout responds consistently only to a small core of factors, while the impact of new digital media on affective polarization and youth participation reveals a complex interplay of variables that challenges simplistic narratives. It is concluded that the ability of elites to manipulate popular preferences is constrained, suggesting a more competent electorate than is often posited, although significant methodological and geographical gaps persist in the literature that require future attention.

Keywords: Metaanalysis • political communication • electoral behavior • polarization • elections

1. Introduction

Political communication is the nexus where power, public opinion, and citizen behavior converge. In contemporary democracies, a persistent question remains: are citizens competent to make informed and coherent political decisions, or are they susceptible to manipulation by political and media elites? (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Kuklinski and Quirk, 2001). The academic literature of recent decades has addressed this question from multiple angles, generating an overwhelming number of empirical studies whose results are sometimes contradictory. The fragmentation of findings makes it difficult to build cumulative and systematic knowledge. To overcome this limitation, the methodology of meta-analysis has become an indispensable tool, as it allows for the statistical aggregation and synthesis of results from multiple studies to obtain a more precise and robust estimate of a phenomenon's effect (Borenstein et al., 2009). This document adopts a meta-analytic approach to critically review and evaluate the empirical evidence in several central areas of political communication. It examines the effectiveness of different communication tactics, from framing and negative campaigning to the impact of new digital media and presidential debates. The objective is twofold: first, to offer a quantitative assessment of the size and consistency of the effects reported in the literature; and second, to critically analyze the methodologies employed, identifying their strengths, weaknesses, and their impact on the conclusions drawn. Through this exercise, we aim to provide a panoramic and nuanced view of the true influence of political communication, arguing that its effects, though real, are often more limited and conditional than popular narratives or isolated studies suggest. This approach allows us not only to consolidate what we know but also to identify gaps in current knowledge and propose directions for future research in a field that is vital for the health of democracy.

2. The Construction of Political Reality: Effects of Framing and Campaigns

One of the most influential concepts in the study of political communication is *framing*, which posits that the way an issue is presented can alter citizens' attitudes, emotions, or behaviors, even if the underlying information is logically equivalent (Druckman, 2001). The prevalence of framing effects is often seen as an indicator of citizen incompetence, suggesting that public preferences can be arbitrary and

easily manipulated. Amsalem and Zoizner (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of 138 experiments to evaluate the overall effectiveness of framing effects in the political domain. Their findings are revealing and qualify the more pessimistic views on the competence of the electorate. On the one hand, they confirm that framing effects are real; they found medium-sized effects ($d = 0.41$ for attitudes and $d = 0.47$ for emotions) when analyzed in diverse contexts without competing frames. This supports the thesis that political and media elites can influence public opinion simply by altering the presentation of an issue. However, the study also highlights the limits of this influence. First, the effects on actual behavior are negligible ($d = 0.11$), suggesting a considerable gap between expressed attitudes and consequent actions. Second, in more realistic scenarios that employ competing frames (where opposing frames are presented, as is often the case in real political debate), the effect weakens substantially ($d = 0.18$). These results suggest that although citizens are not immune to influence, their capacity to be manipulated is limited, especially in competitive information environments and when measuring outcomes of greater consequence, such as behavior.

The study of negative campaigns offers a similar picture, where the conventional wisdom of political consultants clashes with systematic empirical evidence. Negative, or attack, campaigns have become ubiquitous on the premise that they work to discredit the opponent. Lau et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analytic reassessment of this phenomenon, updating previous work with a database that had more than doubled in size and improved in methodological quality. Their conclusions directly challenge popular belief. They found that while negative campaigns tend to be more memorable and stimulate knowledge about the campaign, there is no reliable evidence that they are an effective means of winning votes. In fact, the net effect on vote preference is virtually nil. The attack tends to decrease affect towards the target but also generates a backlash effect that reduces affect towards the attacker. More worrying, however, is the systemic impact. Although they found no consistent evidence that negative campaigns depress voter turnout (a finding that contradicts the famous demobilization hypothesis), they did observe a slight but consistent decrease in political efficacy, trust in government, and the general public mood. Therefore, while the electoral benefits of negativity are dubious at best, its costs to the health of the political system appear to be real, albeit modest. Table ?? synthesizes the key findings of these meta-analyses, underscoring the conditional and limited nature of communication effects.

Table 1: Synthesis of Meta-Analytic Findings on Framing and Negative Campaigns

Phenomenon	Main Finding (Effect and Magnitude)	Implications and Methodological Nuances
Framing Effects	<p>Real but limited effects. Amsalem and Zoizner (2022) find medium-sized effects on attitudes ($d=0.41$) and emotions ($d=0.47$) in 138 experiments. However, the effect on behavior is negligible ($d=0.11$).</p>	<p>Methodology is the starting point. The framing effect is drastically weakened in quasi-experimental designs that simulate a competitive environment ($d=0.18$), where opposing frames cancel each other out. This suggests that single-frame experiments overestimate the effect in the real world. They found no significant differences between equivalence framing and emphasis framing.</p>
Negative Campaigns	<p>Ineffective for winning votes, but with systemic costs. Lau et al. (2007), in a meta-analysis of 111 studies, find no evidence that negative campaigns increase vote preference for the attacker. The net effect on the vote is nil.</p>	<p>Although they are more memorable and increase campaign knowledge, negative campaigns slightly decrease political efficacy and trust in government. The demobilization hypothesis (that negativity reduces turnout) is not supported; the effect on turnout is nil or even slightly positive. The methodological strength of studies has improved over time, but the general conclusions remain.</p>

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Table 1: Synthesis of Meta-Analytic Findings on Framing and Negative Campaigns (continued)

Phenomenon	Main Finding (Effect and Magnitude)	Implications and Methodological Nuances
Presidential Debates	<p>Significant effects on learning and perceptions.</p> <p>Benoit et al. (2003) analyze 87 publications and find that watching debates increases issue knowledge ($r=.256$), issue salience ($r=.187$), and affects perceptions of candidate character ($r=.266$) and vote preference ($r=.149$).</p>	<p>Effects are stronger in primary debates than in general elections, where voters have less prior information. The methodology of the studies is heterogeneous; the design (pre/post vs. post-only) does not appear to be a consistent moderator. The first debate in a series has a greater effect on vote preference than subsequent debates. No significant effect was found on the perception of the candidate's <i>competence</i>.</p>

3. Determinants of Turnout and Voter Behavior

Electoral participation, and particularly the act of voting, is the cornerstone of representative democracy. However, turnout rates vary enormously between countries and over time, which has generated a vast literature dedicated to explaining its determinants. Meta-analyses in this area synthesize decades of research to establish a core model of factors that consistently influence turnout at the aggregate level. Stockemer (2017) and Cancela and Geys (2016) offer two of the most comprehensive reviews, updating and expanding on earlier work such as Geys (2006). These studies, based on the analysis of hundreds of articles and regression models, converge on a surprisingly small but robust core of predictors. Consistently, turnout is higher in contexts where voting is compulsory, where elections are perceived as decisive or important (e.g., first-order versus second-order elections), and in countries with smaller populations. The robustness of these three factors is remarkable across different geographical and temporal contexts.

However, beyond this core, the evidence becomes much more ambiguous. Factors that should theoretically be important, such as the type of electoral system (proportional vs. majoritarian), electoral closeness, or the level of socioeconomic development, show inconsistent results in the literature. For example, although seminal studies found that proportional representation (PR) encourages higher turnout, more recent analyses with a greater diversity of cases, such as those by Stockemer, find that this effect has weakened or disappeared, suggesting it may have been an artifact of case selection focused on established Western democracies. Similarly, electoral closeness, a pillar of rational choice theory, shows a positive effect in less than half of the models analyzed. This indicates that the determinants of turnout are more complex and context-dependent than simple theory suggests. Table 2 summarizes the findings of these meta-analyses, classifying predictors according to the consistency of their effect. This table reveals a clear distinction between a small group of variables with robust effects and a much larger group of variables whose impact is, at best, inconclusive.

A factor that has received increasing attention is the role of political trust. Intuition suggests that trust in political institutions is essential for democratic legitimacy and, by extension, for participation. Devine (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of 61 studies to systematically evaluate the consequences of political trust. His findings indicate that trust has a small to moderate relationship with a variety of outcomes. Specifically, trust is positively related to electoral participation (voting) and compliance with public policies, but it is negatively related to voting for opposition or *challenger* parties. Interestingly, trust appears to have no relationship with informal participation, such as protests, which challenges the idea that distrust necessarily channels citizens towards unconventional forms of participation. Instead, low trust might lead more to apathy and withdrawal from the formal political system than to critical activism. Methodologically, Devine's study underscores a strong geographical bias in the literature (78% of the data comes from Europe or North America) and an over-reliance on cross-sectional designs, which limits causal inferences. Nevertheless, his robust results suggest that trust is a vital resource for system stability, influencing both how citizens interact with institutions and what they demand from them.

Finally, the impact of political scandals on electoral outcomes represents another area of intense debate. Normative theory would suggest that politicians involved in scandals should be severely punished by voters. Praino and Stockemer (2022) conducted a meta-analysis to synthesize the quantitative literature on this topic.

Their findings largely confirm the theory: politicians implicated in scandals tend to receive fewer votes, are more likely to lose elections, and are less likely to win re-election. The effect on voter turnout, however, is much less clear. Some models suggest that scandals depress turnout, possibly due to the cynicism they generate, while others indicate an increase, consistent with the "throw the bums out" hypothesis. The evidence on the impact of scandals is stronger and more consistent in the context of the United States, while in other political systems, the results are more mixed. This again points to the importance of institutional context, such as party systems and accountability norms, in moderating the effects of communication and political events.

Table 2: Synthesis of Meta-Analyses on Determinants of Turnout and Electoral Behavior

Predictor	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Institutional Factors		
<i>Compulsory Voting</i>	Positive and robust effect. Consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of turnout. Stockemer (2017) and Cancela and Geys (2016) confirm its success rate is close to 100%.	The strength of the effect depends on the enforcement of sanctions. The methodology is primarily aggregate data analysis at the country level. The evidence is overwhelmingly consistent, making it the most reliable institutional factor.
<i>Election Importance</i>	Positive and robust effect. First-order elections (national) have higher turnout than second-order elections (local, supranational). Success rate close to 90% (Stockemer, 2017).	Operationalization varies (election type, bicameralism, concurrent elections), but the general pattern is consistent. It reflects that voters respond to incentives related to the power of the office at stake.

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Predictor	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
<i>Electoral System (PR vs. Majoritarian)</i>	<p>Inconclusive and diminishing effect. Although theory predicts higher turnout under PR, recent meta-analyses (Stockemer, 2017) find the effect is weak or non-existent (success rate of 5-48%). The positive effect seems to be an artifact of older studies focused on established democracies.</p>	<p>The evidence has weakened as studies include more cases from outside Western Europe. Operationalization (dummy variable for PR vs. district magnitude) matters; district magnitude is more likely to show a positive effect, though it remains inconsistent.</p>
Socioeconomic Factors	<p>Negative and robust effect. Smaller countries or districts consistently have higher turnout. Success rate of around 75% (Stockemer, 2017).</p>	<p>The relationship is theoretically sound (higher perceived probability of the vote being decisive, greater social cohesion). The effect is one of the most consistent in the aggregate data literature.</p>

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Predictor	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
<p><i>Economic Development (GDP per capita, education)</i></p>	<p>Positive but inconclusive effect. Modernization theory predicts a positive relationship, but empirically, less than half of the studies find a significant effect. The success rate is below 50% (Stockemer, 2017).</p>	<p>The empirical link between affluence and turnout at the macro level is not as strong as theory suggests. Multiple operationalizations (GDP, literacy, education) do not change the general pattern of mixed results.</p>
<p>Situational and Political Factors</p> <p><i>Electoral Closeness</i></p>	<p>Positive but inconclusive effect. Despite its theoretical importance in rational choice, less than half of the models (44%) find that close elections increase turnout (Stockemer, 2017).</p>	<p>The empirical evidence is surprisingly weak and much less consistent than theory predicts. This suggests that other non-rational factors are more important, or that voters' perception of closeness is imperfect.</p>

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Predictor	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
<i>Political Trust</i>	Small to moderate positive effect on formal participation. Devine (2024) finds a positive and significant relationship with voting ($r = 0.06$), but null with informal participation. Trust reduces support for <i>challenger</i> parties.	The meta-analysis reveals a strong geographical bias and a reliance on cross-sectional designs. The results are robust across different measures of trust and modeling strategies, but reverse causality is a major concern.
<i>Political Scandals</i>	Negative effect on incumbent’s votes; ambiguous effect on turnout. Praino and Stockemer (2022) confirm that politicians in scandals lose votes and are less likely to be re-elected. The effect on turnout is inconsistent: some studies find an increase, others a decrease.	The evidence on vote loss is solid, especially in the US. The effect on turnout is highly contextual and unresolved. The studies are primarily observational, making it difficult to isolate the causal effect of the scandal from other concurrent factors.

4. The Digital Era: New Media, Participation, and Affective Polarization

The advent of the internet and the subsequent explosion of digital and social media have radically transformed the political communication environment, generating both optimism about the potential for citizen mobilization and pessimism about

fragmentation and polarization. Research in this area has grown exponentially, and meta-analyses are essential for making sense of a rapidly evolving field. Boulianne (2015) and Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) have made key contributions by synthesizing research on the use of social and digital media and its relationship with civic and political participation, with a particular focus on young people. In general, their findings document a positive and consistent relationship between the use of digital media for political purposes (such as reading news online, discussing politics, or joining groups) and offline participation. The average effect size is modest but significant ($r = 0.143$ for young people). However, the nature of use is key: generic time spent online, without an explicit political purpose, has a null or even negative relationship with participation. This undermines fears that screen time inherently displaces civic engagement and instead supports the idea that digital media are tools that can be used for mobilization by those already interested. A particularly powerful finding is the strong correlation between online political participation (signing petitions, joining groups) and offline participation (attending protests, volunteering), which directly challenges the slacktivism thesis, according to which low-cost online activism substitutes for more demanding forms of participation.

However, causality in this relationship remains an open question. While most research assumes a causal flow from media use to participation (a *gateway effect*), evidence from the few available longitudinal studies suggests that the reverse flow (offline participation leads to online activity) is equally, if not more, strong. This aligns with a reinforcement theory, where digital media are primarily used by those who are already politically engaged, rather than mobilizing the previously inactive. This distinction is crucial for designing interventions aimed at increasing youth participation. At the same time, the digital environment has been implicated in the rise of affective polarization, defined as the tendency of partisans to feel greater affection for their own party and greater animosity toward the opposing party. Lubej et al. (2025) and Kołczyńska (2025) have conducted systematic reviews and meta-analyses on this issue. Their findings indicate a positive and robust association between affective polarization at the individual level and political participation, both institutional (voting) and non-institutional (protesting). The evidence is stronger for the impact on institutional participation. This suggests that partisan animosity, rather than apathy, may be a powerful engine of mobilization in contemporary politics.

Another aspect of the modern media environment is exposure to different viewpoints,

or *cross-cutting exposure*. Classical deliberative democracy theory values such exposure for fostering tolerance and understanding. However, the seminal research by Mutz (2002) argued that while it is good for deliberation, it is bad for participation, as it generates ambivalence and reduces social pressure to act. To resolve the contradictory findings in subsequent literature, Matthes et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 48 studies. Their main conclusion was: overall, there is no relationship between cross-cutting exposure and political participation ($r = 0.002$). This null effect holds across different contexts (source of exposure, topic, online vs. offline), types of participation, and study designs. This finding is of utmost importance, as it alleviates fears of a dilemma between the deliberative and participatory values of democracy. Table 3 synthesizes the findings of these studies, illustrating the complexity of digital media effects, which do not lend themselves to simplistic conclusions of good or bad.

Table 3: Synthesis of Meta-Analyses on Digital Media, Participation, and Polarization

Phenomenon	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Digital Media and Youth Participation	Positive relationship, but use-dependent. Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) find an average positive correlation of $r=0.143$ between digital media use and participation. However, <i>political</i> use of media is key; generic online time has no effect ($r=0.038$).	The vast majority of studies are cross-sectional, which prevents robust causal inferences. The few longitudinal studies suggest that causality may be reciprocal (reinforcement effect). There is a strong correlation between online and offline participation, which contradicts the slacktivism thesis.

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Phenomenon	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Social Media and Participation (General)	<p>Positive relationship but uncertain causality. Boulianne (2015), in a meta-analysis of 36 studies, finds an overwhelmingly positive relationship (82% of coefficients). However, studies with panel data (longitudinal) are less likely to report positive and significant effects than cross-sectional ones.</p>	<p>Study design is a key moderator. Cross-sectional studies, which dominate the literature, may overestimate the effect due to endogeneity (the more participatory use social media more). The effect is weaker for electoral campaign participation compared to civic or protest activism.</p>
Affective Polarization and Participation	<p>Positive and robust relationship. Lubej et al. (2025) and Kołczyńska (2025) find that individual-level affective polarization is positively associated with higher levels of participation, both institutional (voting) and non-institutional (protesting). The evidence is stronger for institutional participation.</p>	<p>Most studies are cross-sectional and focus on Western democracies. The definition and measurement of affective polarization vary, although the feeling thermometer is the most common. Evidence for system-level polarization is weaker and potentially affected by publication bias.</p>

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Phenomenon	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Exposure to Diferent Perspectives (Cross-Cutting Exposure)	<p>Overall null effect on participation.</p> <p>The meta-analysis by Matthes et al. (2019) on 48 studies finds an overall null effect ($r=0.002$). This finding is robust across a wide range of moderators, including the source of exposure (interpersonal vs. media), the type of participation (online vs. offline), and the study design (experimental vs. survey).</p>	<p>This is a powerful meta-analytic finding because it resolves a long-standing controversy in the literature. It alleviates concern about a supposed trade-off between the deliberative and participatory benefits of democracy. It suggests that exposure to a diversity of opinions does not demobilize citizens.</p>

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Phenomenon	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Receptivity to Partisan Cues	<p>Motivated more by expressive identity than by bounded rationality. Bakker et al. (2020), through a series of experiments, find no support for the hypothesis that receptivity to cues is greater among citizens with low cognitive resources. Instead, they find mixed evidence that it is stronger among those with a strong partisan identity and high cognitive resources.</p>	<p>This study uses a strong experimental design with pre-registered replications, increasing confidence in the findings. The results challenge the heuristic model of decision-making and support models of motivated reasoning, where cognitive resources are used to rationalize and defend positions aligned with one’s identity.</p>

5. Candidate Characteristics: Gender, Ethnicity, and Scandals

In an era often described as one of political personalization, the individual characteristics of candidates have gained increasing importance in research on electoral behavior. Attributes such as gender, race or ethnicity, and personal integrity (or lack thereof, in the case of scandals) are analyzed as potential determinants of the vote. Experimental methodology, particularly survey experiments and conjoint factorial designs, has become the predominant tool for isolating the causal effect of these characteristics by presenting respondents with fictitious candidate profiles where only the attribute of interest varies. Meta-analyses that synthesize this experimental literature are therefore especially valuable for estimating the true weight of these

factors.

Research on gender stereotypes in politics has been a prolific field. Banducci et al. (2025), in a meta-analysis covering 63 studies over four decades, offer a comprehensive view of this phenomenon. Their results show a slight but consistent tendency to attribute stereotypical personality traits and policy competencies to candidates. Women are attributed more feminine traits (such as compassion) and competence in feminine policy areas (such as childcare policies), while men are attributed more masculine traits. However, the size of these effects is, in general, very small. Importantly, they find no evidence of a consistent decrease in these stereotypes over time, despite the increased presence of women in politics. The study design proves to be an important moderator: laboratory experiments tend to show stronger stereotype effects than survey experiments, which are in turn more realistic. This suggests that in more controlled contexts, stereotypes are easier to activate, but their influence in more complex and information-rich environments may be smaller. A previous meta-analysis by van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) on media coverage of politicians also found gender biases, albeit complex and dependent on the electoral system. Female politicians receive more attention to their appearance and personal life, and in proportional systems, they receive less coverage overall.

Similarly, the impact of a candidate's race and ethnicity has been the subject of intense experimental research. van Oosten et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 43 candidate experiments published in the last decade. Their central finding is surprising and challenges many common assumptions: on average, voters do not evaluate racial/ethnic minority candidates differently from white candidates. The overall effect for minority candidates is a statistical null (0.235 percentage points). The only group showing a slight advantage is Asian-American candidates in the U.S., who are evaluated marginally more positively. This finding suggests that the underrepresentation of minorities in politics cannot be explained by discriminatory bias on the part of the general electorate (the demand side). Instead, the truly powerful factor is shared identification. When voters share the same race or ethnicity as a candidate, they evaluate them, on average, 7.9 percentage points higher. This *in-group favoritism* effect is robust and substantial for all minority groups studied. The implication is clear: the barrier to minority representation lies not so much in discrimination by majority voters, but rather in supply-side factors (such as candidate recruitment by parties) and in mobilization within the minority groups themselves.

Table ?? offers a comparative synthesis of meta-analyses on candidate characteristics. The table highlights both the predominant methodology in each area (primarily experimental) and the estimated effect sizes. A cross-cutting conclusion is that although stereotypes and biases exist, their magnitude in the evaluation of candidates by the general electorate is often small or null. The most potent factor, by far, is shared identity, whether partisan, racial, or ethnic. This suggests that modern voter behavior is rooted in group psychology, where affinity with the "us" and distance from the "them" are much more powerful determinants than a candidate's abstract individual attributes, unless those attributes signal membership in a relevant group.

Table 4: Synthesis of Meta-Analyses on the Effect of Candidate Characteristics

Candidate Characteristic	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Candidate Gender (Stereotypes)	<p>Small but consistent effects.</p> <p>Banducci et al. (2025) find a slight tendency to attribute stereotypes. The average effect size for feminine traits in women is 0.04 (on a 0 to 1 scale), and for feminine competencies is 0.05. The effect for masculine traits in men is even smaller (-0.01). There is no decline over time.</p>	<p>The literature is dominated by experimental designs. Lab experiments produce stronger effects than survey experiments. The lack of decline in stereotypes over 40 years is a notable and pessimistic finding. Most studies are from the U.S.</p>

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Table 4: Synthesis of Meta-Analyses on the Effect of Candidate Characteristics (continued)

Candidate Characteristic	Main Finding and Effect Magnitude	Critical Analysis of Evidence and Methodology
Candidate Race/Ethnicity	<p>Overall null effect, but massive effect of shared identity. van Oosten et al. (2023) find no evidence that voters discriminate against racial/ethnic minority candidates in general (overall effect of 0.235 percentage points, not significant). However, when the voter and candidate share the same race/ethnicity, the candidate’s evaluation increases by 7.9 percentage points.</p>	<p>The analysis is based almost exclusively on candidate experiments, a methodology with high internal validity. The finding of a null effect for general discrimination is powerful and challenges conventional wisdom. It points to supply-side factors (party recruitment) as the main barrier to minority representation.</p>
Political Scandals (Integrity)	<p>Negative effect on electoral support; ambiguous effect on turnout. Praino and Stockemer (2022) confirm that scandals reduce the incumbent’s vote share and their probability of re-election. The effect on turnout is inconsistent, with studies showing both increases and decreases.</p>	<p>Evidence comes mainly from observational and quasi-experimental studies, not pure experiments. The effect is clearer in the U.S. two-party system. The ambiguity of the effect on turnout suggests that scandals can have both mobilizing (to punish) and demobilizing (due to cynicism) effects that cancel each other out or depend on the context.</p>

6. Methodological Discussion and Critical Synthesis

A review of the literature on political communication reveals not only substantive conclusions but also methodological patterns crucial for interpreting the strength and generalizability of the accumulated evidence. The main strength of the meta-analyses reviewed here is their ability to transcend the limitations of individual studies, providing an aggregate estimate of effect size and assessing the consistency of findings across diverse contexts and research designs. This approach allows for the identification of which effects are robust and which are fragile or context-dependent. For example, the conclusion that exposure to different perspectives has a null effect on participation (Matthes et al., 2019) is a powerful finding precisely because it is based on the aggregation of multiple studies with different methodologies, which gives it a credibility that no single study could achieve. Similarly, the demonstration that the effect of framing on behavior is almost non-existent, despite its effect on attitudes, is a crucial distinction that only systematic analysis can clearly reveal (Amsalem and Zoizner, 2022).

However, these meta-analyses also expose persistent weaknesses and biases in the literature. First, there is a clear geographical bias. The vast majority of research is conducted in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in other established Western democracies. As noted by Devine (2024) and others, this severely limits the generalizability of findings to non-Western, emerging, or authoritarian contexts, where the dynamics of media, institutional trust, and social cleavage structures may be radically different. Second, there is an over-reliance on certain methodological designs. Research on the effects of digital media and political trust is overwhelmingly based on cross-sectional survey data, which makes causal inferences tentative at best. Conversely, research on candidate characteristics is based almost entirely on experiments, which have high internal validity but whose external validity can be questioned, especially lab experiments using student samples (Banducci et al., 2025). The tension between internal and external validity is a defining feature of the field.

A third critical point is the heterogeneity in measurement. Key concepts such as political trust, affective polarization, or even participation are operationalized in multiple ways, complicating the comparison and synthesis of results. The meta-analysis by Devine (2024) shows that although the effects of trust are consistent across different objects (parliament, government, politicians), the literature rarely

engages with the multidimensional nature of the concept. Similarly, the strength of the evidence for a phenomenon often depends on how the outcome is measured. The finding that framing affects attitudes but not behavior is the clearest example of this. This underscores the need for future studies not only to measure expressed attitudes but also behavioral outcomes, which are more politically consequential. Finally, publication bias—the tendency to publish statistically significant results more readily than null results—is a constant threat. The most rigorous meta-analyses, such as that of Amsalem and Zoizner (2022), employ statistical techniques (such as funnel plots and the trim and fill method) to assess and correct for this bias. Often, as in their case, it is found that effect sizes for less-studied outcomes (emotions, behavior) may be inflated due to this bias. The growing adoption of open science practices, such as the pre-registration of hypotheses and analysis plans, is a promising response to this challenge.

A large literature from the past three decades indicates that an especially effective way to assess how competent citizens are is to examine their susceptibility to framing effects. In the political domain, a framing effect occurs when presenting the same political issue or problem in a different way alters citizens' attitudes, emotions or behavior. (*Amsalem and Zoizner, 2022, p. 221*)

7. Theoretical Synthesis

Here, the theoretical synthesis based on premises and axioms born from the evidence is developed.

7.1. Notation and Variables

Let there be a population of voters $i = 1, \dots, n$. We define:

- $Y_i \in \{0, 1\}$: binary electoral behavior (e.g., vote = 1, not vote = 0) or another relevant dichotomous behavioral outcome.
- $A_i \in \mathbb{R}$: standardized latent attitude (mean 0, variance 1) towards a policy/candidate/party.
- $E_i \in \mathbb{R}^k$: vector of communication exposures (typical components: *framing*, negativity, debate, digital media use, cross-cutting exposure, etc.).

- $P_i \in \mathbb{R}$: individual affective polarization (e.g., difference in feeling thermometers towards *in-group* vs. *out-group*, standardized).
- $T_i \in \mathbb{R}$: political trust (standardized).
- C_i : relevant shared identity with the candidate (race/ethnicity/party), with $C_i = 1$ if there is an identity match, 0 otherwise.
- Z_i : set of institutional (e.g., compulsory voting, election importance), socioeconomic, and contextual controls.

We will use two equivalent frameworks:

1. **Potential outcomes:** $Y_i(e)$ is the outcome if $E_i = e$.
2. **Reduced-form structural model:**

$$\text{logit}(\Pr(Y_i = 1)) = \alpha + \beta^\top E_i + \gamma_A A_i + \delta P_i + \theta T_i + \phi C_i + \psi^\top Z_i + u_i.$$

Meta-analytic effects will be introduced as constraints on parameters or bounds on changes in means/standardized coefficients.

7.2. Meta-Analytic Axioms (MA) Supported by the Literature

MA-F1 (Framing on behavior) Based on Amsalem and Zoizner (2022): the average effect size of *framing* on behavior is small. We represent

$$|d_{F \rightarrow Y}| \leq 0.15, \quad \text{with point estimate } d \approx 0.11.$$

MA-F2 (Competing frames) With competing frames, the effect is reduced:

$$|d_{F^\pm \rightarrow A}| \leq 0.20.$$

MA-N1 (Negativity and vote) Lau et al. (2007) find a net effect ≈ 0 on the attacker's vote preference; we allow

$$\beta_{\text{neg} \rightarrow \text{vote}} \in [-\varepsilon_N, +\varepsilon_N], \quad \text{with } \varepsilon_N \text{ small.}$$

MA–N2 (Systemic costs) Negativity slightly reduces efficacy/trust:

$$\frac{\partial T}{\partial \text{neg}} < 0 \text{ (small).}$$

MA–D1 (Digital media and participation) Boulianne (2015); Boulianne and Theocharis (2020):

$$r(\text{political digital use, participation}) \approx 0.14 (> 0); \quad r(\text{generic time, participation}) \approx 0.$$

MA–CCE (Cross-cutting exposure) Matthes et al. (2019):

$$r(\text{cross-cutting, participation}) \approx 0.00.$$

MA–AP (Affective polarization) Lubej et al. (2025); Kołczyńska (2025):

$$\delta = \frac{\partial}{\partial P} \text{logit Pr}(Y=1) \geq \underline{\delta} > 0 \text{ (positive and robust effect).}$$

MA–TR (Trust) Devine (2024):

$$r(T, \text{vote}) \approx 0.06 (> 0), \quad \text{and } \theta_{\text{challenger}} < 0.$$

MA–ID (Shared identity) van Oosten et al. (2023):

$$\mathbb{E}[\text{eval} \mid C=1] - \mathbb{E}[\text{eval} \mid C=0] \approx 7.9 \text{ percentage points,}$$

while the average effect of being a minority, in general, is ≈ 0 .

MA–GEN (Gender stereotypes) Banducci et al. (2025); van der Pas and Aldering (2020): small effects on traits/competencies and coverage; we treat these effects as typically $|d| \leq 0.05$.

MA–TURN (Aggregate determinants of turnout) Cancela and Geys (2016); Stockemer (2017); Geys (2006):

$$\psi_{\text{compulsory voting}} > 0 \text{ (strong)}, \quad \psi_{\text{election importance}} > 0 \text{ (robust)}, \quad \psi_{\text{population size}} < 0 \text{ (robust)}.$$

7.3. Methodological Lemmas (Transformations and Composition)

Lemma 1 (Link $d \leftrightarrow$ probability). For a binary outcome with a baseline probability p_0 , a standardized change d in a latent predictor can be approximated by a change in log-odds $\Delta\ell \approx (\pi/\sqrt{3})d$. Then

$$p_1 \approx \text{logit}^{-1}(\text{logit}(p_0) + (\pi/\sqrt{3})d).$$

Observation: useful for bounding Δp when only d is reported.

Lemma 2 (Composition of small effects). If d_1, \dots, d_m are standardized effects with $\sum_j |d_j| \leq D$, then, by Lemma 1, the aggregate change in probability is bounded by

$$\Delta p \lesssim \text{logit}^{-1}(\text{logit}(p_0) + (\pi/\sqrt{3})D) - p_0.$$

Lemma 3 (Mediation by engagement). Let $\text{Use} = \text{Use}_{\text{political}} + \text{Use}_{\text{generic}}$ and M be prior civic engagement. If $\text{Use}_{\text{generic}} \perp Y \mid M$ and $r(\text{Use}_{\text{political}}, Y) > 0$, then the total effect of “generic time” on Y is null (or of indeterminate sign) except for spurious paths via M .

7.4. Theorems and Proofs

Theorem 1 (Upper bound of the behavioral impact of framing). Under MA-F1 and Lemma 1, the maximum change in behavioral probability $|\Delta p|$ induced by isolated framing satisfies

$$|\Delta p| \leq \text{logit}^{-1}(\text{logit}(p_0) + (\pi/\sqrt{3}) \cdot 0.15) - p_0.$$

Proof (step-by-step).

1. MA-F1: $|d_{F \rightarrow Y}| \leq 0.15$.
2. Lemma 1: $\Delta\ell \approx (\pi/\sqrt{3})d$.
3. By the monotonicity of logit^{-1} , the variation in p is bounded by substituting $|d|$ with its supremum 0.15.
4. The stated bound is concluded. □

Corollary 1A (Competitive framing environment). Under MA-F2, the impact on attitudes is bounded by $|d| \leq 0.20$; if the attitude→behavior translation has a Lipschitz constant $L \leq 1$, then $|d_{F\pm \rightarrow Y}| \leq 0.20$ and the probabilistic bound is obtained by replacing 0.15 with 0.20 in Theorem 1.

Theorem 2 (Negativity: net null electoral outcome in expectation). Suppose an attack produces (i) *damage to the opponent* $b > 0$ and (ii) a symmetric *boomerang* on the attacker $s > 0$, with $b \approx s$ on average (MA-N1). Then the expected impact on the vote gap is 0.

Proof.

1. Let V_A be the vote for the attacker and V_O for the opponent.
2. The net effect on the difference $D = V_A - V_O$ is $\Delta D = -s - (-b) = b - s$.
3. MA-N1 implies $\mathbb{E}[b - s] = 0$; therefore $\mathbb{E}[\Delta D] = 0$. □

Corollary 2A (Systemic costs without electoral benefit). Under MA-N2, even if $\mathbb{E}[\Delta D] = 0$, negativity reduces T (trust/efficacy) on the margin: $\partial T / \partial \text{neg} < 0$; hence, its systemic benefit–cost ratio is ≤ 0 .

Theorem 3 (Digital effect: gateway vs. reinforcement). Under MA-D1 and Lemma 3, the *total effect* of digital use on participation is strictly positive if and only if there exists a *political* component of use with $r > 0$ and the generic component introduces no residual bias after controlling for engagement M .

Proof.

1. We decompose Use into political and generic.
2. MA-D1: $r(\text{Use}_{\text{political}}, Y) > 0$; $r(\text{Use}_{\text{generic}}, Y) \approx 0$.
3. If $\text{Use}_{\text{generic}} \perp Y \mid M$, then its partial effect is null; the positive path from the political component remains.
4. Concludes that the total sign is > 0 under the stated conditions. □

Theorem 4 (Affective polarization mobilizes participation). Under MA-AP, in the reduced-form logit model, it holds that $\delta \geq \underline{\delta} > 0$; therefore, for all i ,

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial P_i} \Pr(Y_i=1) = \Pr(Y_i=1)(1 - \Pr(Y_i=1)) \delta > 0.$$

Proof. Derivation of the logistic function with respect to P_i and use of MA-AP. □

Theorem 5 (Cross-cutting exposure: cancellation of pathways). Suppose two pathways: (i) a deliberative-positive one ($+\eta$) that increases Y via knowledge/tolerance; (ii) an ambivalence-negative one ($-\eta$) that reduces social pressure to act. If the average weights of both pathways are equal in magnitude, the total effect is 0, consistent with MA-CCE.

Proof.

1. Write $\partial Y / \partial CCE = \eta - \eta = 0$ on average.
2. MA-CCE provides evidence of an aggregate null effect; the proposed mechanism justifies the cancellation. □

Theorem 6 (Shared identity dominates weak stereotypes). Let the candidate evaluation be $V = \beta_0 + \beta_S S + \beta_C C + \varepsilon$, where S captures gender/race stereotypes (small by MA-GEN) and C shared identity. If $|\beta_C| \cdot \mathbb{E}[C] \gg |\beta_S| \cdot \mathbb{E}[S]$ and $\beta_C > 0$ (MA-ID), then the sign of ΔV from variation in identity is determined by C .

Proof.

1. MA-GEN: $|\beta_S|$ is small; MA-ID: β_C is large (effect ≈ 7.9 pp).
2. By the triangle inequality, $|\beta_C C + \beta_S S| \geq |\beta_C C| - |\beta_S S|$.
3. If $|\beta_C C|$ dominates, then $\text{sign}(\Delta V) = \text{sign}(\beta_C C) > 0$. □

Theorem 7 (Combination of tactics: “no large effects” under small sums). Let there be a communication package with standardized effects $\{d_j\}_{j=1}^m$ (framing, negativity, debate, etc.), each respecting its corresponding axiom (MA-F1, MA-N1, ...). Then, by Lemma 2, the maximum probability change is bounded by the aggregate $D = \sum_j |d_j|$. In realistic settings with competing frames and null/small effects (MA-F2, MA-N1, MA-CCE), D is small \Rightarrow variations in p are boundedly small.

This is proven by the direct application of Lemma 2 after imposing the meta-analytic bounds per component. \square

Theorem 8 (Robust institutional determinants of turnout). In the Z component of the model, under MA-TURN, if compulsory voting is activated or the importance of the election increases, then:

$$\Delta \logit \Pr(Y=1) = \psi_{\text{comp}} \Delta \mathbb{1}_{\text{comp}} + \psi_{\text{imp}} \Delta \text{Imp} - |\psi_{\text{size}}| \Delta \log(\text{population}),$$

with $\psi_{\text{comp}}, \psi_{\text{imp}} > 0$ robustly and $\psi_{\text{size}} < 0$ robustly; therefore, these are *levers* of high relative causal certainty compared to communications with small effects.

Proof. Linear specification in log-odds with signs fixed by robust meta-analytic evidence (MA-TURN). \square

7.5. Consequences

One of the revealed consequences is the existence of **hard limits to behavioral engineering via framing**. Thanks to **Theorem 1**, it is shown that, even under the **most favorable conditions**, the variation in the probability of voting, Δp , is **strongly bounded**. When **competing frames** are introduced, as detailed in **Corollary 1A**, the upper bound may **increase slightly**, but the **overall impact** of framing on electoral behaviors **remains modest** and limited. Regarding the use of **negativity** in campaigns, another **critical consequence** is that it **does not buy votes on average**, but it **does sell trust**. The combination of **Theorem 2** and **Corollary 2A** clearly establishes that the **expected electoral benefit** of negative strategies is **approximately zero**. However, this tactic carries a **systemic cost**, which is **greater than zero**, eroding **public trust** and **institutional legitimacy** in the long run. Regarding the role of **digital media**, it is concluded that they function as **reinforcers** of participation, but they **are not a panacea**. **Theorem 3** formalizes this idea: only the **specifically political component** of digital platform use is what **drives citizen participation**. The **generic time** spent on these platforms, without a direct political focus, does not generate an impact on electoral mobilization, which underscores the **importance of content** and **intentionality** over mere exposure.

An important finding is that **polarization mobilizes**, *ceteris paribus*. **Theorem 4** demonstrates that there is a **positive derivative** of the probability of voting with

respect to the degree of **polarization (P)**. This shows that, the greater the polarization, the greater the **probability of participation** electoral. However, from a **normative perspective**, this relationship suggests a **clear trade-off** between **voter mobilization** and **civility** or the **quality of public debate**, posing a dilemma for democratic health. Contrary to some intuitions, **informational diversity does not demobilize**. **Theorem 5** is key because it **reconciles deliberation** with **participation**. This implies that exposure to a **plurality of sources** and viewpoints **does not reduce the propensity** of citizens to vote. In fact, the **aggregate effect** of informational diversity on participation is shown to be **null**, dispelling concerns that a rich informational environment might lead to apathy or paralyzing indecision. Another result is that **shared identity dominates weak stereotypes**. **Theorem 6** provides an explanation of why the **supply of candidates** is crucial in electoral mobilization. This theorem highlights the **importance of recruitment** and **in-group mobilization**, that is, presenting candidates who resonate with the **collective identity** of voters, overcoming the impact of **more superficial** or **less ingrained stereotypes** in the voting decision.

A **general** and very practical **conclusion** is that the **sum of small effects** inevitably leads to a **small effect**. **Theorem 7** rigorously formalizes the **popular intuition** that there are **no silver bullets** in political communication. That is, no **individual communication tactic**, however brilliant it may seem, will have a **massive impact** on its own. Success lies in the **accumulation of multiple actions**, each with its modest effect, which challenges the search for unique and miraculous solutions. Finally, **Theorem 8** states forcefully that **institutions beat tactics**. This result underscores that **institutional levers**, such as **compulsory voting** or the **perceived importance of an election**, are capable of generating **larger** and **more certain variations** in electoral participation. These **large structural forces** far outweigh the impact of **individual communication tactics**, relegating the latter to a secondary role in determining mass mobilization.

To carry out an effective **practical calibration**, which considers both **priors**, **goals**, and experimental **design**, several key elements are required. First, the specification of **informative Bayesian-style priors** is essential. This includes defining that $d_{F \rightarrow Y}$ is distributed as a **Normal** $\mathcal{N}(0.11, 0.05^2)$, and that $d_{\text{neg} \rightarrow \text{vote}}$ follows a **Normal** $\mathcal{N}(0, 0.03^2)$, both **truncating** at the bounds of the Attribution Models (AM). Additionally, it is assumed that δ is distributed as a **Normal** $\mathcal{N}(\underline{\delta}, \sigma_{\delta}^2)$, with the condition that $\underline{\delta} > 0$. Second, regarding the **design** of the research, **prioritizing behavioral outcomes** instead

of just attitudes, incorporating **direct frame competition** in studies, and using **panels or natural experiments** to analyze digital media and trust. It is equally critical to **explicitly measure shared identity** and any **boomerang mechanisms** that may arise. Finally, regarding the **reporting** of results, it is indispensable to **convert** the values of d into **changes in probability** using **Lemma 1**, which improves the **substantive interpretability** and **practical relevance** of the conclusions obtained.

8. Conclusion

This journey through the literature of political communication, guided by the synthetic lens of meta-analysis, yields a clear conclusion: the effects of political communication are real, but their magnitude is moderate and their nature conditional. The narrative of a massively malleable electorate, whose preferences can be shaped at will by elites through media frames or negative campaigns, does not find solid support in the accumulated empirical evidence. While framing can influence attitudes and negative campaigns can damage trust in the system, their ability to alter concrete behaviors like voting or to determine electoral outcomes is surprisingly limited. Citizens, especially in competitive informational environments, appear to be more resistant to manipulation than is often attributed to them.

The dawn of the digital age has introduced new dynamics but has not altered this fundamental conclusion. Digital and social media act more as reinforcement tools for the already engaged than as engines of mobilization for the apathetic. The political use of these platforms correlates positively with participation, but the direction of causality remains an open question. At the same time, these media are associated with an increase in affective polarization, suggesting that their main impact may not be so much ideological persuasion as the intensification of group identities and animosity towards adversaries. Regarding the determinants of voter behavior, a small core of factors, such as compulsory voting and the importance of the election, emerges as robust and consistent. Beyond that, inconsistency is the norm, indicating that electoral behavior is a complex and multicausal phenomenon that defies parsimonious models.

The analysis of candidate characteristics reveals that while gender and race stereotypes persist, their direct impact on voter evaluation is, on average, small. Much more powerful is the effect of shared identity. Voters overwhelmingly favor candidates they perceive as part of their tribe, whether defined by party, race, or ethnicity.

This primacy of group identity over other factors is perhaps the most cross-cutting and potent finding of contemporary research in political behavior. Taken together, the meta-analytic evidence paints a portrait of a citizen who is neither the rational automaton of classical theory nor the passive victim of propaganda, but a social actor whose perception and behavior are shaped by their group loyalties and the informational context in which they operate. To advance our understanding, future research must continue to adopt rigorous methodologies that can unravel causality, expand its geographical scope beyond Western democracies, and measure outcomes that go beyond self-reported attitudes to capture political behavior in all its complexity.

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