Reconsidering Political Cynicism and Political Involvement: A Test of Antecedents

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between political cynicism and political involvement by connecting them with antecedent variables: need for cognition, elaboration and perceived media importance. The findings show that elaboration and political involvement are exogenous, casting influence on political cynicism, need for cognition, and perceived importance of media. This finding confirms the previous contention that political involvement is the key to harnessing political disaffection. The results also show that political involvement is positively associated with political cynicism, echoing recent evidence that cynical citizens can be politically involved in some context. The implications of the results for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Political cynicism, political involvement, elaboration, antecedent

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INTRODUCTION

The past 40 years, by and large, saw a trend of decline in civic participation in consolidated democracies (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001). In America, civic participation, even measured on voter turnout only, has been dwindling over the past few decades (Census, 2008; Mindich, 2004). This is particularly true of voters age 18 to 29, as they remain at the lowest level of reported voting among eligible voters (Glynn, Huge, & Lunney, 2009). Jeffres, Lee, Jian, Yoon, and Atkin (2008) argue that the resurgence in political interest and activities in the 2008 presidential campaign could be a deviation because incumbents were absent and the races were competitive in both parties. As American democracy is anchored in the public's civic engagement, the declining trend, to some, could be a warning sign.

Owing to the concern over increasing political alienation among younger citizens (Delli Carpini, 2000; Macedo, 2005), political communication scholars have addressed the interactions between media and politics, and have attempted to pinpoint the causes (e.g., Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Crotty & Jacobson, 1980; Jeffres, Neuendorf, Bracken, & Atkin, 2009; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002, 2004). Research indicates that mass media provide the bulk of politically relevant information (Atkin, 1981), and often serve as young voters' first contact with politics (Chaffee & Yang, 1990). As a result, considerable scholarly efforts have been made to link media use with this "spiral of disaffection." It was found that political cynicism and apathy are particularly worrisome as they may distance young voters from active civic engagement (Dennis & Webster, 1975; Lau & Erber, 1985). In the meantime, political involvement, as a motivating force, was found to negatively predict political cynicism and apathy (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). In other words, involved individuals are less likely to be cynical or apathetic toward politics.

When exploring possible factors that contribute to elevated cynicism, researchers suggest that the negative political campaign tactics and biased media portrayals add fuel to the flame of cynicism (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hart, 1994; Robinson, 1976). However, this attribution encounters opposition from other scholars. Research suggests that it is an oversimplification to simply blame media and campaign advertising (Buckingham, 1997; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). Pinkleton, Um and Austin (2002) argue that political disaffection is multi-faceted and media do not necessarily discourage voters from political participation. In fact, research reveals that some negativity on mass media actually provides a catalyst for political information consumption and political participation (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002).

The complexities in voters' political decision making and media use processes may have led to the inconsistency in research findings (Pinkleton & Austin, 1999). Pinkleton, Fortman and Austin (1998) suggest that scholars often overlook individual differences in media use and motivation. Likewise, researchers contend that political disaffection is a poorly-understood concept and is often oversimplified in previous research (Austin & Pinkleton, 1995). In order to calibrate these conflicting findings, it is important to further delineate the conceptual boundaries of political cynicism. Researchers also suggest that political involvement, coupled with political efficacy, is critical to motivating the politically disaffected (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). In that vein, it is equally important to reconsider the conceptual intricacies of political involvement, as it may provide the missing link between media use and civic engagement. This study attempts to

reconsider the relationship between political cynicism and political involvement by identifying their antecedents. Specifically, this study examines the role of need for cognition, elaboration, and perceived media importance as antecedent variable to political cynicism and involvement.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES

The concern over the news media's influence on civic engagement spans over almost half a century (Buckingham, 1997). Often seen as early rumination on media's social influence, the knowledge gap hypothesis posits that differences in socio-economic status (SES), particularly education level, result in a gap in knowledge of public affairs between those high and those low on the SES scale, and the gap can be remedied by increased levels of differentiation in social structure and media exposure (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1986; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). Researchers have argued that knowledge is closely related to, and sometimes serves as the driving force behind attitude formation and change (Hamilton & Mineo, 2009; Katz, 1960; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In that vein, citizens' political attitudes are likely to be different because their knowledge of civic matters varies along demographic lines.

POLITICAL CYNICISM

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the public was found to be relatively efficacious and trusting toward government (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976). The public trust in government since then has been on the prolonged downturn despite a temporary upsurge in the 1980s. Parallel to the low trust in government, the past two or three decades also witnessed a trend of decline in political participation (Macedo, 2005; Mindich, 2004), which is often called "spiral of disaffection" and has spawned a great amount of scholarly attention.

Miller (1974) explained that cynicism "refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations" (p. 952). Political cynicism reveals a feeling of distrust in politics, politicians, and governmental institutions by the public (Strama, 1998). It has been similarly defined as a lack of confidence in the political systems (Bandura, 1986; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Cynical voters are found to believe that the political system and governments are corrupt and problematic and they cannot be trusted (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The more cynical voters become, the less likely they are to engage themselves in political activities. Ultimately they may distance themselves from political processes (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004).

The above discussion attests to the multi-faceted nature of political cynicism. Pinkleton and Austin (2004) tapped into political cynicism by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree on such general statements as: politicians are out of touch with the real world and politicians only care about their special interests. Political cynicism was typically defined and measured as a stable psychological trait of individuals (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). Ultimately, political cynicism boils down to a lack of trust or confidence in political institutions and incumbent politicians (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Lau & Erber, 1990). As a result, political cynicism is also conceptualized as lack of trust towards politics and politicians in this study.

Cynicism has been attributed by some scholars to negative political campaign tactics by the news media (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Televised news is blamed for its emphasis on candidate images rather than substantive campaign issues (Crotty & Jacobson, 1980). Over time, the news media's horse-race and image-oriented coverage corrodes the public confidence in politics. Cappella and Jamieson (1996) found that news framing has a direct effect on public cynicism toward politics and an indirect effect on public confidence in news media. Media cynicism is closely related to political cynicism. Put differently, "cynics in one domain tend to be cynical in other domains" (p. 83).

A growing body of research suggests that political disaffection is very complex and it is an oversimplification to only blame news media for voter malaise (Austin & Pinkleton, 1995; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Although citizens indicate that negative political advertising is unethical and uninformative (Garramone, 1984), research indicates that negative advertisements do not necessarily discourage political participation and may instead contribute to voter turnout (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002). Thus citizens' reported negativity towards political news coverage does not imply that they will give up voting altogether (Austin & Pinkleton, 1995). Research also indicates that support for third party candidacies results in lesser degrees of trust in government because third party candidates are often critical of the political system, which may trigger more cynical responses from those who can relate to third party candidates (Koch, 2003).

The existing literature reveals the complex nature of political cynicism and its impact on the political process. Miller (1974) argues that dissatisfaction with policy alternatives proposed by two major political parties leads to cynicism. Lau and Erber (1990) suggest that issue-oriented cynicism may apply to some voters but may not hold true for those who basically disapprove of how the incumbent politicians handle their job. Cynicism is more likely to arise due to issue dissatisfaction among issue-oriented voters and disagreement with incumbents' approaches among incumbent-oriented individuals (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). In other words, cynicism has different individual antecedents.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

As Putnam (1995) pointed out, the decline in "social capital" leads to the decline in civic engagement. Social capital refers to "features of social life-networks, norms, and trust" (Putnam, 1995, p. 664). Social capital is related to but different from political participation because political participation refers to our relations with political institutions while social capital denotes our relations with one another (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Putnam sees social capital as the basis for civic engagement. As such, the theory of social capital assumes that the more we connect, the more trust each other. Ultimately, a cohesive and trusting community should have high levels of civic participation.

Jeffres, Lee, Neuendorf, and Atkin (2007) found that both values and reading the newspaper predict community social capital. Thus, they argue that reading the newspaper and having political discussion adds to audience backgrounds and values. Different from newspaper, research indicates that excessive consumption of television news could sap trust and therefore social capital (Jeffres et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000; Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009). Social capital has multiple dimensions. Romer et al. (2009) measured social capital by interpersonal

trust and civic engagement. Jeffres et al. (2007)'s measure of social capital by community attachment, community activities, organizational ties, and community assessment seems to offer more face validity as it captures trust, network, and norms dimensions.

Political involvement, based on most previous studies, is a narrower concept as it has been defined as a motivational variable. If social capital essentially has a behavioral and psychological component, political involvement is synonymous with the psychological dimension of social capital. Political involvement is one of the most studied yet least agreed-upon concepts, having been conceptualized at different dimensions on different levels (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990; Zaichkowsky, 1986). Zaichkowsky (1986) defined involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of objects based on inherent needs, values and interests" (p. 342). Pinkleton and Austin (2001) observed that involvement is often conceptualized as an individual's perceptions of issue relevance at a particular point in time or level of interest in a short-term outcome. According to Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998), involvement is centered on differences in motivational processes at an individual level. Individuals' involvement may encourage them to actively seek out information to confirm or disconfirm information on television. Similarly, some researchers postulate that a higher level of involvement predicts higher knowledge, political learning and political behaviors (Culbertson & Stempel, 1986).

Researchers suggest that involvement is personal, physical and frequently situational (Zaichkowsky, 1986). Similarly, involvement is considered to be an individual and internal state of arousal with intensity, direction and persistence (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990). Situational political involvement encompasses voters' perceived relevance and interest under a particular political climate, such as a major political election.

Operationalizing involvement as identification with particular social groups, Gunther (1992) demonstrated that individual's involvement in situations, issues, or groups has greater explanatory power than either demographics or individual's dispositions. In examining the interface between ego-involvement and the third person effects, Perloff (1989) defined involvement as psychological affiliation with Israel or Palestine and found that pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian partisans believed that news coverage on American television would cause neutral viewers to turn more unfavorable toward their side and more favorable toward the "enemy."

The literature, taken together, paints a mixed picture regarding what involvement means. Despite the differences in conceptualization, involvement has generally been found to correlate heavily with perceived relevance and is often manifested as a high level of engagement with issues or products (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990). Similar to political cynicism, political involvement has been frequently defined as a stable psychological trait that reveals the perceived relevance of public affairs issues in the political communication literature (Kanihan & Chaffee, 1996; Pinkleton, 1999, 2001). As such, political involvement is defined as perceived relevance and level of interests or concerns over politics in this study.

Involvement is important to political decision making, as involvement activates individuals' purposeful information search and involved individuals are active information seekers (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2004). Informed decision making derives from a higher level of involvement. As involvement increases, people's repertoires of information sources are likely to increase, as

the motivating nature of involvement encourages citizens to regularly and purposefully engage in active information seeking (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Tan, 1980). As individuals are integrated into politics, they develop more active information seeking habits and become less likely to distance themselves from political information. From a social capital perspective, lack of trust or cynicism would mean less networking and civic activity, hence less political involvement.

H1: Political cynicism would be negatively related to political involvement.

ANTECEDENTS TO POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Research has shown that political attitudes can be bound racially such that political cynicism can serve to rally black voters while efficacy has little impact on black voter turnout (Southwell & Pirch, 2003). Political cynicism also has been found to differ by nationality. For example, de Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that political cynicism did not dampen the voter turnout in a Danish referendum. Based on a social capital perspective, Romer et al. (2009) argue that a pessimistic life outlook will lessen the trusting of others and therefore impede meaningful media use and civic activity. In short, literature suggests that there are individual, national, contextual differences to political cynicism and involvement, echoing the concern that individual differences have often been neglected in cynicism research (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). In that vein, it is necessary to examine the antecedent variables or personal correlates of political cynicism and political involvement.

ELABORATION

One important precondition for the central route to elaboration is that a message recipient has the necessary motivation, which is dependent partly upon the perceived personal relevance of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the elaboration likelihood is high. Cynical voters may perceive politics they see on news media as "distant" or "irrelevant" (Buckingham, 1997). As voters high in cynicism typically distance themselves from public affairs information, they are less likely to have the necessary motivation to seek out additional information. Conversely, involved voters are active information seekers who are said to be motivated. As such, the likelihood of elaboration is high for politically involved citizens. The literature leads us to expect that political involvement and elaboration enjoy a positive relationship. Political cynicism, by comparison, seems to be inversely associated with elaboration.

H2a: Elaboration would be positively related to political involvement.

H2b: Elaboration would be negatively related to political cynicism.

NEED FOR COGNITION

Need for cognition refers to the psychological tendency to put situations into an integrated and orderly structure (Cohen, Stotland, & Wolfe, 1955). Individuals high in need for cognition are found to report that is *fun to think or quest for reality* (Cohen et al., 1955). In the elaboration likelihood model, need for cognition assumes rational beings that are prone to scrutinize the environment in order to make sense out of it (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Cacioppo and Petty (1982) conceptualized need for cognition as the statistical tendency and intrinsic enjoyment

individuals derive from engaging in effortful information processing. Compared to individuals high in need for cognition, individuals low in need for cognition are said to be cognitive misers (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). Involved individuals are active information seekers and they are high in need for cognition (Schroeder, 2005). Research also indicates that voters who reported high in need for cognition also exhibited higher voting intentions than voters low in need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986). The above discussion suggests that need for cognition is a trait that runs strong in individuals with high political involvement. On the other hand, cynical voters' need for cognition in this respect may not be as strong as that of involved voters.

H3a: Need for cognition would be positively related to political involvement.

H3b: Need for cognition would be negatively related to political cynicism.

PERCEIVED MEDIA IMPORTANCE

Cynical voters are less likely to perceive media outlets as important information sources for public affairs, as they are shut off from the political process. On the contrary, involved voters are active and are frequently looking for information from the news media (e.g., Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Therefore, media sources may appear more important and relevant to them. Perceived importance refers to the extent to which voters see media sources as important to political information seeking. Frequency of exposure is a rough gauge of media use. Media importance measures, instead, appear to offer more validity than simple media exposure (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Perceived importance of media has been used as a surrogate measure for attention to media and was found to predict lower cynicism and increased efficacy for some media sources (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2002). Therefore, involvement should be positively associated with perceived importance of media sources and cynicism should be negatively associated with perceived importance of media sources.

H4a: Perceived importance of media would be inversely related to political cynicism.

H4b: Perceived importance of media would be positively related to political involvement.

H4c: Elaboration would be positively related to perceived importance of media sources.

H4d: Need for cognition would be positively related to perceived importance of media sources.

METHOD

Hypotheses were tested against a purposive sample of college students. A Web-based survey was conducted with students who were recruited from large lecture classes from various disciplines at a large Northeastern university. The data collection took place from April 3 to April 23, 2009, resulting in a sample of 439 valid responses. Although this study makes no claim

of representativeness, college students are a population of relevance for the current topic, as they are noted for their lack of political engagement (Glynn et al., 2009; Romer et al., 2009).

SAMPLE PROFILE

The sample consisted of 49.4% male (n=217) and 46.9% female (n=206) respondents, with ages ranging from 18 to 29 (M=19.06, SD=1.28). Respondents came from a variety of racial backgrounds, in which 81% (n=355) were Caucasian, 6.2% (n=27) were Asian, 3% (n=13) were Hispanic, and 3% (n=13) were African American. Among the respondents, 2.3% (n=10) reported that they were very conservative, 15.9% (n=70) were conservative, 25.5% (n=112) were moderate, 29.8% (n=131) were liberal, 6.8% (n=30) self-identified as very liberal, 15.7% (n=69) either did not know or refused to answer the question, and 3.9% (n=17) gave no response. No sample weight adjustments were made to the sample for the analysis. The mean age, gender proportions, and other demographics were similar to the university's population as a whole. Based on these similarities, we feel somewhat confident reporting statistical significance of our results.

MEASURES

Political involvement. The political involvement scale (M=4.06, SD=1.42, α=.91) has been used quite extensively in previous research (e.g., Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Respondents were asked to answer the extent to which they agree or disagree on a 7-point rating scale with such statements as "I pay attention to political information" and "I actively seek out information about politics." The higher the number, the more involved respondents reported to be.

Political cynicism. Political cynicism (M=4.05, SD=1.07, α=.91) was measured by four items adopted from Pinkleton & Austin (2001, 2004). Again respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree on a 7-point rating scale with such statements as "politicians are out of touch with life in the real world" and "politicians put their own interests ahead of the public's interest." The higher the number, the more cynical respondents reported to be.

Perceived importance of media. For perceived importance of media (M=4.74, SD=.99, α=.79), respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point rating scale the perceived utility of newspaper, television, online news portals, news magazine, political comedy and satire, talk radio, and interpersonal discussion in terms of political information seeking. This measure was based on previous studies (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2002).

Elaboration. Elaboration (M=4.40, SD=1.14, α=.86) was measured by four items consistently used in previous research (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002; Kosicki & Mcleod, 1990; Shroeder, 2005). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree on a 7-point rating scale with such statements as "I tried to think of the practical applications of what I read," "I tried to relate the ideas in the story to my own past experiences," "I thought about what actions should be taken by policy-makers based on what I read," and "I found myself making connections between the story and what I've read and heard about elsewhere."

Need for cognition. Need for cognition (*M*=4.27, *SD*=.71, *α*=.85) is an established 18-item scale and has been applied in many studies (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984; Shroeder, 2005). Some items were re-coded to maintain uniformity of direction (see Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984 for full description). Although there are concerns that multiple dimensions exist in the need for cognition scale, research consistently shows that the 18 items measure one dominant factor and a few small factors that account for a negligible portion of the variance (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984; Culhane, Morera, & Hosch, 2004; Sadowski, 1993). In other words, one factor explains the variance in the 18 items adequately. As a result, no further data reduction analysis was performed on this scale.

RESULTS

Before testing the hypotheses, a zero-order correlation was conducted to explore the relationship among variables. In general, political cynicism and need for cognition had weaker relationships with communication variables than elaboration and political involvement. Political cynicism did not have a significant relationships with traditional media except for the newspaper (*r*=.10, *p*<.05) and political discussion (*r*=.21, *p*<.01). However, political cynicism did exhibit significant relationships with non-traditional media such as online sources (*r*=.18, *p*<.01) and political comedy (*r*=.17, *p*<.01). Contrary to political cynicism, need for cognition only had significant relationships with traditional media such as television (*r*=.11, *p*<.05), newspaper (*r*=.15, *p*<.01), and political discussion (*r*=.20, *p*<.01). Political involvement had significant positive relationships with all communication variables. Political involvement had stronger relationships with traditional media such as newspaper (*r*=.23, *p*<.01) and news magazine (*r*=.21, *p*<.01) than non-traditional media such as online news (*r*=.12, *p*<.05), political comedy (*r*=.14, *p*<.01), and talk radio (*r*=.14, *p*<.01). Elaboration had significant relationships with all communication variables. Elaboration had the strongest relationship with newspaper (*r*=.37, *p*<.01), followed by political discussion(*r*=.35, *p*<.01), online sources (*r*=.28, *p*<.01), television (*r*=.26, *p*<.01), magazine (*r*=.25, *p*<.01), radio (*r*=.18, *p*<.01), and political comedy (*r*=.16, *p*<.01).

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

A series of multiple regressions were conducted to test the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 predicted that political cynicism would be negatively associated with political involvement. Contrary to the prediction, results indicated that political cynicism and political involvement were positively associated (*β*=.22, *p*<.001). Hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis 2a posited that elaboration would be positively related to political involvement. Results indicated that political involvement was positively associated with elaboration (*β*=.26, *p*<.001). Hypothesis 2a was supported. Hypothesis 2b posited that elaboration would be negatively related to political cynicism. Results indicated that political cynicism was also positively associated with elaboration (*β*=.14, *p*<.05). Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

Table One: Regressions Testing Hypotheses

Dependent variables/ Independent variables	β	R^2	Adjusted R^2	df	F
Involvement		.25	.25	(4, 433)	36.49***
Cynicism	.23***				
Elaboration	.27***				
Need for cognition	.16***				
Media importance	.11*				
Cynicism		.07	.06	(3, 434)	11.40***
Elaboration	.24***				
Need for cognition	-.05				
Media importance	.08				
Media importance		.16	.15	(2, 435)	40.68***
Elaboration	.38***				
Need for cognition	.05				

Note. Standardized betas and significant levels for r^2 are reported only for the whole model. Demographic variables are noted only where they are significant.

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

Hypothesis 3a predicted that need for cognition would be positively related to political involvement. Results indicated that political involvement was positively associated with need for cognition ($\beta=.16$, $p<.001$). Hypothesis 3a was supported. Hypothesis 3b predicted that need for cognition would be negatively related to political cynicism. Although the relationship between cynicism and need for cognition was in the predicted direction, it didn't reach statistical significance ($\beta=-.09$, $p>.05$). Hypothesis 3b was therefore not supported.

Hypothesis 4a predicted that perceived importance of media would be inversely related to political cynicism. Results indicated that cynicism was positively associated with perceived importance of media sources but the relationship was not significant ($\beta=.09$, $p>.05$). Hypothesis 4a was not supported. Hypothesis 4b posited that perceived importance of media would be positively related to political involvement. Results revealed a positive relationship between political involvement and perceived importance of media sources ($\beta=.13$, $p<.01$). Hypothesis 4b was supported.

Hypothesis 4c posited that elaboration would be positively related to perceived importance of media sources. Results indicated that elaboration was positively associated with perceived media importance (β=.30, p<.001). Hypothesis 4c was therefore supported. Hypothesis 4d posited that need for cognition would be positively related to perceived importance of media sources. Hypothesis 4d was not supported because the relationship between need for cognition and perceived media importance didn't reach statistical significance (β=.04, p>.05).

A path analysis was conducted to test a causal model linking political involvement and political cynicism with antecedent variables. In the hypothesized path model, political ideology and gender were used as anchor variables. Political ideology and gender were chosen as anchor variables because they were the only two demographic variables that had significant relationships with theoretical variables. Second, demographic variables are often treated as anchor variables in path models because they cannot be caused by other theoretical variables in the model. Need for cognition and elaboration were used as antecedent variables influencing perceived media importance. Political cynicism and political involvement were entered as consequent variables influenced by need for cognition, elaboration and political involvement. The hypothesized model yielded a poor fit, χ^2(10, N=439) =66.27 p=.001. The comparative fit index (CFI) and the normed fit index (NFI) also produced poor fit indices at .83 and .81 respectively. The root mean square error of approximation yielded a large index of .106, indicating that the hypothesized model did not fit the observed data well.

Figure One: Revised Causal Model Linking Political Involvement,

Political Cynicism and Perceived Media Importance with Antecedent Variables
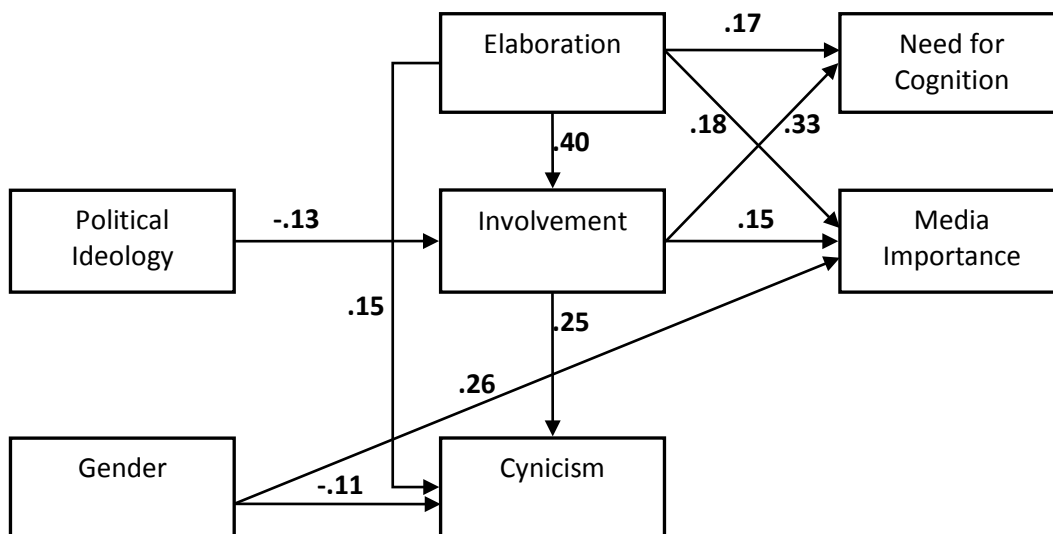
Because need for cognition did not have a strong relationship with the major consequent variables, elaboration and involvement were used as the antecedents in the revised path model

(see figure one), with political ideology and gender as anchor variables. The recursive model yielded good fit of the observed data, $\chi^2(11, N=439) =15.03, p=.18$. The CFI and NFI yielded very good index of fit at .953 and .986 respectively. The RMSEA reported a value of .029, also indicating a good fit. In addition, all the path coefficients were significant ($p<.05$). Elaboration was found to be a consistent antecedent variable. Elaboration had a strong exogenous influence (see Garson, 2008; Kenny, 2009) in both political involvement and cynicism. Elaboration also had a significant impact on need for cognition and media importance. Need for cognition and perceived media importance, however, were found endogenous (see Garson, 2008; Kenny, 2009), influenced by elaboration and political involvement. Political ideology had significant exogenous impact on political involvement. Gender had significant impact on both political cynicism and perceived media importance.

DISCUSSION

Earlier literature has consistently shown that political cynicism is the opposite of political involvement (Pinkleton, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002, 2004). Politically cynical citizens are said to be shut off from political information. By contrast, politically involved individuals are active information seekers and they are open to public affairs information from the news media. Earlier studies reasoned that political cynicism represents a deep-seated distrust and negativity toward political institutions and politics (Miller, 1974). The lack of trust distances cynics from meaningful political participations. In that vein, political cynicism is associated with decrease in political involvement (e.g., Mindich, 2005). However, the negative relationship between political cynicism and political involvement was not replicated in this study. Instead, these two concepts were found to be positively related, echoing recent finding that political cynicism is perhaps positively related to voter turnout and mobilization in some context (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; de Vreese, 2005). In a study of the 2000 Danish referendum campaign of introduction of the euro, de Vreese (2005) concluded that there is little evidence that cynicism dampens voter turnout when the assumption that cynicism is detrimental to political participation is put under empirical scrutiny. Simply put, cynical individuals can also be politically mobilized given proper conditions.

The reason why cynical individuals are also politically involved could be due to the fact that they are cynical but not apathetic. Put differently, citizens can be cynical to the extent that they retain some interest in politics. In de Vreese's terms, "it may be that voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and the importance of participating in an election" (p. 633). The leap earlier literature made from political distrust to being shut-off from political information and participation may have overlooked this possibility.

Second, the conceptualizations and measures of political cynicism are overly simplistic in earlier studies (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Lau & Erber, 1990). Fraser (1971) argues that if political cynicism is rooted in non-political feelings, any changes in political structure and output can only have a short-lived impact. On the other hand, if political cynicism is the product of distrust toward political objects, then changes in political structure and output can curb the frequency of political cynicism in some people. While distrust is an important aspect, there may be other important dimensions to political cynicism, such as critical thinking or political skepticism. Political skepticism refers to the tendency to critically evaluate information and put information on hold for further confirmation (Pinkleton, 1999). It has been found to be

positively related to political involvement and negatively related to political apathy (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). If political skepticism is another rough gauge of political cynicism, political cynicism should have a positive association with political involvement because of the positive association between skepticism and involvement. The separation scholars made between political cynicism and political skepticism would mean a false dichotomy for some voters under certain political contexts. As de Vreese (2005) puts it, cynicism is "perhaps little more than an indication of an 'interested and critical citizenry' " (p. 283).

Situational involvement may spike or plummet due to specific political climates or occurrences. Distrustful individuals can be involved under some circumstances. As Jeffres et al. (2008) argued, the 2008 presidential election was a case in point because cynical citizens became engaged due to the competitive races and dissatisfaction with the incumbents. Although political cynicism and skepticism were found to be separate constructs (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004), their relationship hasn't been consistently tested in previous research. It is possible that past cynicism and skepticism measures share the same underlying latent factor. Toward that end, a combined measure of past cynicism and skepticism items perhaps will provide a better gauge of political cynicism. Future research can test whether political cynicism and skepticism share an underlying factor.

Different from political cynicism, involvement was more stable as most of the predictions concerning political involvement were supported. This confirms previous finding that political involvement is important as it may provide the key to harnessing political alienation (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002). Politically involved citizens are more likely to elaborate on relevant issues and be higher in need for cognition than those apathetic and cynical individuals. Politically involved citizens are less likely to be apathetic toward politics. Political involvement may be one of the key counteracting forces of the current spiral of disaffection. Therefore the critical question becomes how to motivate citizens to be involved to the extent that their involvement guards against apathy.

In exploring the antecedents to political cynicism and political involvement, this study found that elaboration was the most reliable antecedent variable, influencing all other variables. This indicates that citizens' innate tendency to think critically drives their political attitudes rather than the other way around. Politically apathetic and involved individuals perhaps have some prior differences in their tendency to elaborate. On the other hand, need for cognition did not have a consistent relationship with political attitudes. Our causal model indicated that political involvement and elaboration influence need for cognition. In other words, as citizens become involved in political information seeking, they developed a higher need for processing cognitively demanding information. This again confirms the importance of political involvement in political information seeking and processing.

Consistent with previous findings, this study confirms a gap between television and newsprint (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2007). Perceived importance of the newspaper has stronger relationships with political involvement, elaboration and need for cognition than television. Those who regard the newspaper as an important information source are more likely to elaborate on public affairs and engage in civic activity. The strongest predictor is political discussion. This echoes the social capital perspective in that those who treat political discussion as important to political decision-making are more likely to be those who are involved in community activity

and trusting towards others (Putnam, 2000; Romer et al., 2009). In turn, they are more likely to elaborate on public affairs and be politically involved.

This study has several limitations. First of all, we used a purposive sample which may have constrained the external validity of the results. However, the college sample studied here is a population of relevance, as civic engagements haven been observed decreasing most sharply on college campuses (Mindich, 2004). Despite major newspapers' attempt to revitalize the college-aged audience, newspaper readership has declined substantially. The emergence of new media technologies compartmentalizes the audience, making it even more difficult to reach the emerging adults. Our research found that political cynicism had significant relationships with new media such as political comedy and online sources, but not with traditional media. Considering the nature of our sample, political cynicism perhaps has more to do with new media than with traditional media for younger voters. Although perception of new media is a positive correlate of political cynicism, this does not imply that young voters become less likely to critically process public affairs information as they become more cynical. However, our results do seem to suggest that political cynicism is influenced by perceptions of new media. Perhaps new media such as political satire enhance political cynicism by painting a negative picture of politics and politicians. If new media have become essential to younger citizens' political socialization, future research should continue to monitor the impact of new media. Civics educators who aim to facilitate political participation from the youth perhaps could consider designing more web-based civics curricula. Similarly, politicians who bemoan the lack of political participation perhaps could facilitate political engagement by reaching younger constituencies through a range of new media outlets, as was the case with the 2008 presidential election.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the antecedents to political cynicism and political involvement. We found that elaboration and political involvement are the two antecedents to political cynicism and media perceptions. Based on this evidence, we argue citizens' innate tendency to think critically drives their political attitudes rather than the other way around. We also argue that cynicism may denote more than simply distrustful citizenry. Cynical individuals are just as likely to critically process public affairs information as involved individuals because we found that elaboration is a positive antecedent to political cynicism. Importantly, we found that political cynicism and involvement can be positively related for certain demographics in certain contexts, echoing emerging evidence on cynicism and political engagement (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2005). Finally, consistent with the research on younger voters' media diet, we found that political cynicism is more strongly related to new media than traditional media. We thereby suggest that more attention is needed to monitor the impact of new media in political participation.

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