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Comparative Corrective Action: Perceived Media Bias and Political Action in 17 Countries

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Abstract

The corrective action hypothesis predicts that people will take political action in response to media content they perceive to be biased against them, and evidence has accumulated in favor of it. However, research has not yet investigated the hypothesis in comparative context. This study fills that gap in the literature, relying on the Comparative National Election Project ($N = 23{,}527$), and analyzing data from 17 countries. Results show evidence of an overall positive relationship between perceived media bias and political action, and they also show evidence that this relationship varies in strength between countries. Moreover, press freedom partially explains this variation. Results are discussed in light of the theory of corrective action and recent trends in political participation worldwide.

Global publics expect unbiased political coverage, yet many people consider news organizations in their country to be biased against their point of view (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, & Silver, 2018). These perceptions of bias have consequences for political behavior: Perceived media bias may spur action directed towards correcting the public record. In response to this observation, scholars have put forward the corrective action hypothesis, which predicts that people will take some sort of political action in response to media content they perceive to be biased against them (Rojas, 2010; Rojas, Barnidge, & Abril, 2016; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008).

While evidence has accumulated in support of the hypothesis (e.g., Chung, Munno, & Moritz, 2015; Feldman, Hart, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf, 2017; Hart, Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2015; Kim, 2015; Lim & Golan, 2011; Lin, 2014; Wei

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& Golan, 2013), research has not yet investigated the role of media and political systems in shaping the relationship between perceived media bias and political action. This study fills that gap in the literature, undertaking a cross-national analysis of the relationship between perceived media bias and political participation in 17 countries. Relying on the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP), a collection of surveys conducted in countries around the world during election years ($N = 23{,}527$), this study tests the relationship between perceived media bias and political participation, accounting for the role of press freedom in shaping this relationship.

Perceived Media Bias

People process information in light of their previous beliefs (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), and research has identified a wide range of these perceptual biases, including the "hostile media perception," or the tendency for partisans on both sides of a political or social issue to see ostensibly neutral media content as biased against their point of view (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In explaining the phenomena, Gunther (1992) has argued that it should be understood as a "relational variable—an audience response to media content," (p. 147). In other words, perceptions of media bias are more a function of someone's ideology and levels of trust in media rather than an objective assessment of media content (Perloff, 2015).

Scholars have recently argued for a conceptual distinction between the perception of bias and biased perception (e.g., Barnidge et al., 2017; Gunther, 2015). Biased perception—including the hostile media phenomenon—refers to the identifiable misperception of media content. The original hostile media study (Vallone et al., 1985) certainly falls under this rubric, as do a host of subsequent studies that have observed the phenomenon in a variety of informational contexts (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Perloff, 1989). By contrast, research on perceived bias focuses on perception regardless of whether it is accurate (e.g., Barnidge et al., 2017; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2016). This study adopts the latter perspective, observing perceptions of media bias independently of whether those perceptions are right or wrong, because research conducted across different countries suggests that perceived media bias is on the rise and trust in media is decreasing (Edelman, 2017; Inglehart et al., 2014).

Corrective Action

Research shows that perceived media bias has consequences for political behavior. The corrective action hypothesis predicts that when people perceive media bias, they will take action to correct for the possible influence of that content on others (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Rojas, 2010; Rojas et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2008). The core argument of corrective action is grounded in two related phenomena: perceived media bias and perceived media influence. In as much as people believe media are biased and influential, they will attempt to counter what they perceive to be negative effects of the media by engaging in political action. In other words, people will attempt to "correct" the presumed influence of the "wrongs" they encounter in the public sphere. Recently, evidence has accumulated in support of the corrective action hypothesis. For example, evidence suggests that perceived bias is related to political expression (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hart et al., 2015),

activism (Chung et al., 2015; Feldman et al., 2017; Lim & Golan, 2011; Wei & Golan, 2013), social media activism (Wei & Golan, 2013), and participation in protests and political campaigns (Rojas, 2010; Rojas et al., 2016; Kim, 2015; Lin, 2014).

In order to understand the dynamics of corrective action, it is helpful to revisit the theoretical mechanisms driving the two phenomena that comprise it: political action and perceived media bias. First, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) problematize the topic of political participation, outlining three reasons why people don't participate in politics: They can't; they don't want to; and nobody asked them. Thus, ability, motivation, and mobilization drive political participation. Scholars have examined a variety of motivations for political participation, including costs/benefits (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968) and citizenship norms (Dalton, 2008). We argue that perceived media bias also falls into this category: It provides individual-level motivation to correct perceived wrongs forwarded by the biased media (Rojas, 2010).

These motivations arise from one of two psychological processes that generate perceived media bias: selective categorization and social identity. The first explanation, which is older and formed the original basis for investigation of the "hostile media phenomenon," suggests that perceived media bias arises from selective categorization processes in which people incorrectly categorize favorable or neutral information in news stories as unfavorable (e.g., Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). As a result, people tend to form incorrect impressions of the balance of information presented in news content. The second explanation, which is newer and coincides with the growth of Social Identity Theory as a social scientific theory, proposes that perceived media bias arises from social identity processes instead (Reid, 2012). According to this theory, the need to maintain positive distinctiveness inherent in group identification leads people to see news stories as hostile toward their in-group. Recent research suggests that both the selective categorization and social identity mechanisms work simultaneously (Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, & Wise, 2017). Thus, when it comes to corrective action, people are motivated by perceived media bias to (a) counterbalance "wrong" views or (b) "speak up" for their in-group.

Forms of Political Participation

The literature distinguishes between voting and other forms of political participation (Teorell, Torcal, & Montero, 2007). Voting is the most common form of political participation. It is a planned behavior that is scheduled far in advance, and it is associated with dutiful citizenship norms (Bimber, Cunill, Copeland, & Gibson, 2015). Other forms of political participation, on the other hand, are less common, less planned, and driven less by traditional notions of citizens' duties. These behaviors therefore share more in common with one another than with voting, and they may include working for a campaign, attending campaign meeting, donating to a campaign, attending a protest, or attempting to persuade someone of one's point of view (Rolfe & Chan, 2017). Recent literature has pointed toward new types of behaviors that occur online, and some scholars have argued for a distinction between online and offline political participation. We focus exclusively on offline participation because of the nature of the sample and relatively low internet penetration rates in some countries. Importantly, prior research has treated both voting and offline political participation as forms of corrective action (Rojas et al., 2016).

H1: Perceived media bias will be positively related to voting.

H2: Perceived media bias will be positively related to political participation.

Country-Level Variation in Corrective Action

As Gunther (1992) argues, perceived media bias is a relational variable in that it characterizes audience response to media content. But these responses are shaped by the contours of the media and political systems in which audience members are embedded. That is, the perception that media are biased against one's views is, of course, relative to the things that makeup one's "views," which could include (but are not limited to) preference for or identification with political parties and actors, selection of media organizations, attitudes about salient political issues, and cognitive and affective reactions to the nature and tone of media coverage (Eberl, Boomgaarden, & Wagner, 2017). Therefore, the meaning of perceived media bias varies across national contexts, and so, too, could its relationship with political action.

Three country-level factors seem particularly germane to the study of corrective action: press-party parallelism, media ideology, and media concentration. Press-party parallelism refers to the extent to which media organizations align with the views and aims of specific political parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and evidence suggests it is higher in countries such as Spain that have a tradition of party patronage for newspapers. This concept is important for the study of media bias because the greater the level of press-party parallelism, the more likely political participation will be defined by action in support of a political party. For example, Van Kempen (2007) argues that parties are mobilizing forces, and finds that press-party parallelism has a positive effect on voter turnout in a cross-national comparison of EU countries. This argument implies that electoral participation was defined by and driven by the party press. Thus, corrective action should vary according to a country's press-party alignment because the party press plays a large role in shaping responses to perceived media bias in out-party media.

A closely related concept is media ideology, which is the range of ideologies represented within a media system regardless of party affiliation (Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Sinkinson, 2014). Ideologically diverse systems present a broader range of political perspectives, making contrast between competing perspectives more likely. Because these contrast effects play a central role in both social judgment and social identity processes that give rise to corrective action (Gunther et al., 2017), corrective action may be more likely in systems with diverse media ideologies. Thus, corrective action should also vary according to a press system's ideological diversity.

Media concentration is the degree to which a country's major media outlets are owned by the same entities, and research has found the level of media concentration in a given country can influence the relationship between perceived media bias and political action (Nir, Rojas, & Mazorra, 2016). In systems with more concentrated media organizations, media power is consolidated in the hands of a relative few (Nir et al., 2016). This concentration of power could contribute to a widespread sense of inefficacy, because the visibility of concentrated power may reduce individuals' belief that they can make a difference (Graber, 2003). Therefore, corrective action may be limited in countries with high levels of media concentration due to a general lack of political efficacy. Thus, corrective action should vary according by media concentration.

Press Freedom as a Country-Level Moderator

Each of these three factors is captured by prominent and publicly available measures of press freedom, which refers not only to the absence of legal restrictions on the press

(Hutchins et al., 1947), but also the political and economic factors that shape news media (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007; Freille, Haque, & Kneller, 2007; Van de Vliert, 2011). Specifically, leading measures of press freedom tend to include editorial independence, ideological diversity, and ownership structures of the news, all of which have been linked to both perceived media bias (Carkoglu & Yavuz, 2011; Chia, Yong, Wong, & Koh, 2007) and political participation (Leeson, 2008). Thus, press freedom captures a range of important country-level factors.

This study tests the possibility that press freedom moderates the relationships predicted by corrective action, and there are at least two theoretical mechanisms that explain why it may do so. To be clear, the study does not test these mechanisms directly, but rather assumes they are operating in the background. Both revisit Verba and colleagues' (1995) ideas about why people participate in politics. While perceived media bias may provide the motivation to participate, press freedom could affect individuals' ability to do so, as well as the mobilization efforts of political groups and networks. Therefore, press freedom likely interacts with perceived media bias because motivation is necessary but not sufficient for participation.

News media affect individuals' ability to participate in politics. They are a primary source of informational resources, and these resources enable participation by building political efficacy (Moeller, De Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014) or the belief that one can participate and make a difference. Scholars typically distinguish between internal efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to participate, and external efficacy, or the belief that one can make a difference (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Both of these forms of efficacy are important for participation, and both are affected by social and political systems (Karp & Banducci, 2008) such as the media system. To the extent that a lack of press freedom limits informational resources, individuals in that country will be less able to develop a belief in themselves and their ability to make a difference.

News media also affect the mobilizing efforts of groups and networks. News media often provide information that can be used to mobilize people for political action (Norris, 2006)—for example, the occurrence of a political event or protest. This mobilizing information is shared by individuals within social networks as part of the social flow of news media (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). If press freedom limits the dissemination of mobilizing information, it may also limit the ability for groups and networks to mobilize people for action. Thus, even if people believe the media to be biased, they may not recognize engagement opportunities if mobilizing information is limited by the lack of press freedom. Based on this logic, we ask whether press freedom moderates the relationship between perceived media bias and participation.

RQ1: Will press freedom moderate the relationship between perceived media bias and voting?

RQ2: Will press freedom moderate the relationship between perceived media bias and political participation?

Methods

Data

This study is based on data from the Comparative National Election Project (or CNEP; see, e.g., Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Eveland, Song, & Beck, 2015).

Founded in late 1980s, CNEP is not a single comparative survey, but rather a collection of 52 surveys (and growing) conducted from 1990 to 2017 in 26 countries around the world during election years. The individual surveys have been aggregated over time by an international team of political communication scholars, and they are characterized by an increasing degree of standardization in survey items over time, facilitating easier comparison across countries and elections. For this study, 17 surveys from 17 different countries—hereafter referred to as "country years"—were chosen based on the availability of data on key items and variability on press freedom. The study uses a country's most recent country year in or after 2000, provided that country-year survey contains available data on key measures. The 17 country years are: Argentina 2007, Chile 2000, Hong Kong 2015, Hungary 2006, Mozambique 2004, Portugal 2005, Spain 2004, Taiwan 2004, Dominican Republic 2010, Mexico 2012, United States 2012, Italy 2013, Kenya 2013, Colombia 2014, South Africa 2014, Turkey 2014, and Greece 2015. Press freedom scores for these countries (described in the measures section below) range from −1.52 (Mexico and Turkey) to 1.47 (Portugal) with a relatively high variance of $Var. = 1.00$.[1]

Because some key questionnaire items were regrettably omitted from some of these surveys, a multiple imputation technique (specifically, predictive mean matching) was used to impute missing values. First, multiple imputation was performed within each country. Then, the data were merged, and a second imputation was performed only for the control variables, but not for the independent or dependent variables. This technique provides the advantage of preserving countries for use in the analysis, while avoiding the disadvantage of reducing between-country variation on the key variables. Predictive mean matching works as follows: First, cases with complete data were used to predict values of variables with missing data, producing a set of coefficients. Next, a random draw was taken from the predictive posterior distribution to produce a new set of coefficients, which were then used to compute predicted values for all cases with at least one missing value. Finally, an observed value close to the predicted value of each missing case was located and assigned as a substitute. This process was repeated 50 times, and the average imputed value was taken as final. The multiple imputation procedure yielded a final N of 23,527. Country-year sample sizes range from 795 (Chile 2000) to 2,929 (Spain 2004). Please see u.osu.edu/cnep/ for survey response rates and sampling procedures for each country year.[2]

Measures: Dependent and Independent Variables

Voting. Voting is measured with two survey items. The first item asked respondents whether they voted in the most recent election (0 = No, 1 = Yes), and the second item asked respondents for which party they voted in the previous election based on a list of relevant political parties. The second item was recoded to be a dichotomous item (0 = Did not vote, 1 = Voted), and these two items were averaged to create a final index. Scores of zero mean the respondent did not vote in either election. Scores of .5 mean they voted in one, but not the other. Scores of 1 mean they voted in both ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.38$, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max. = 1.00$).

[1]Plots of country-level distributions for key variables are available in Supplementary Appendix A.
[2]Diagnostic plots for the multiple imputation procedures are available in Supplementary Appendix C.

Political participation. Political participation was measured with five items asking respondents whether, during the course of the election, they worked for a campaign, attended campaign meeting, donated to a campaign, attended a protest, or attempted to persuade someone else to vote for specific candidate (all items measured on dichotomous scales: 0 = No, 1 = Yes). Responses were averaged to form an index ($M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.21$, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max = 1.00$).

Perceived media bias. The independent variable, perceived media bias, was constructed in several steps. First, respondents were asked to name a media outlet they paid attention to during the recent election for (a) newspapers, (b) radio, (c) television, and (d) online news (e.g., "During the campaign, which [newspaper] did you read most often?"). Second, they were asked if these media were biased ("Do you think this [newspaper] you [read] most often favored a particular political party or candidate?") (0 = No, 1 = Yes). Third, they were asked which party the outlet favored, based on a list of relevant parties in that country. Fourth, those respondents who specifically reported no bias were assigned a zero for that medium (newspapers, radio, television, and online news). For respondents who reported bias, the party they named was compared to an item measuring party identification, wherein respondents chose from a list of relevant parties.[3] If the two responses matched, the respondent was assigned a value of −1 for that medium. If the two responses did not match, the respondent was assigned a value of 1. This method resulted in four medium-specific bias scores that ranged from −1 to 1. These four items were then weighted by the news use frequency items (see below, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max. = 4.00$) for the relevant medium. These weighted items were then averaged to create the final variable (*Cronbach's alpha* =.71, $M = 0.72$, $SD = 1.14$, $Min. = -4.00$, $Max. = 4.00$).

Measures: Individual-Level Control Variables

Newspaper news. Newspaper news was measured with a single item (0 = Never, 4 = Frequently) asking respondents how often they read newspapers about the election ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.65$, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max.$ 4.00).

Radio news. Similarly, radio news was measured with a single item (0 = Never, 4 = Frequently) asking respondents how often they listened to radio news about the election ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.70$, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max. = 4.00$).

Television news. Likewise, television news was measured with a single item (0 = Never, 4 = Frequently) asking respondents how often they watched television news about the election ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.55$, $Min. = 0.00$, $Max. = 4.00$).

[3]A relatively small number of respondents (approximately 1,600 out of more than 23,000) reported bias, but subsequently failed to name a party. These responses were dropped from the analysis. They differed significantly from the rest of the sample in terms of demographics, political orientations, and news use. However, because they make up a relatively small proportion of the sample (<7%), the bias introduced via non-response is minimal.

Online news. Finally, online news was measured with a single item (0 = Never, 4 = Frequently) asking respondents how often they used online news about the election ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 1.34$, *Min.* = 0.00, *Max.* = 4.00).

Ideological extremity. Respondents were asked to place their political ideologies on a L-R scale (0 = Liberal, 10 = Conservative). This scale was folded to create an ideological extremity variable ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.83$, *Min.* = 0.00, *Max.* = 5.00).

Political knowledge. Survey respondents were given a fact-based political knowledge test, which was used to create a political knowledge variable (six items). Correct scores (0 = Incorrect, 1 = Correct) were added together ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.27$, *Min.* = 0.00, *Max.* = 6.00).

Political interest. A single survey item was used to tap political interest. The item asked respondents "Would you say that you are very, somewhat, not very or not at all interested in politics" (0 = Not at all, 3 = Very) ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 0.99$, *Min.* = 0.00, *Max.* = 3.00).

Internal political efficacy. Internal political efficacy was measured with a single survey item that asked respondents the extent to which they agree (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) that "generally, politics seems so complicated that people like me cannot understand what is happening." The item was reverse coded ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.30$, *Min.* = 1.00, *Max.* = 5.00).

External political efficacy. External political efficacy was measured with a single survey item that asked respondents the extent to which they agree (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) that "politicians don't care much about what people like me think." The item was reverse coded ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.13$, *Min.* = 1.00, *Max.* = 5.00).

Demographics. The analysis controls for education (measured with a single item where 0 = none and 7 = post-graduate degree. $M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.75$, *Min.* = 0.00, *Max* = 7.00), age ($M = 43.67$, $SD = 16.83$, *Min.* = 17, *Max.* = 100), and gender (52% = female).

Measures: Country-Level Moderator

Press freedom. A press freedom index was constructed based on the authors' prior research (Barnidge, Huber, Gil de Zúñiga, & Liu, 2018), and it includes data from two sources: (a) Freedom House and (b) the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset. For both, we used the data point closest to the election year in each country. The Freedom House Press Freedom Index (www.fredomhouse.org) is created from composite scores for each country's "legal environment for the media, political pressures that affect reporting, and economic factors that affect access to news and information" (freedom-press.org/report-types/freedom-press). This index has been criticized for reflecting a neoliberal bias. Countries that have close ties to the United States and/or have American-style political institutions tend to score higher than countries that do not

(e.g., Giannone, 2010; Steiner, 2016). However, while these studies show a bias in the measure before 1989, they also show that the Freedom House scores align more closely with other indices of democratic performance after that time. That said, our measure counteracts potential bias in the Freedom House measure by including the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) freedom of expression index (www.v-dem.net; variable name: v2x_freexp_thick; see Coppedge et al., 2016). This index not only provides an alternative measure of press freedom, but it also includes measures of social norms that tap into cultural dimensions of free expression lacking in the Freedom House scores. These two data series were standardized and then averaged [*Cronbach's alpha* =.69, $M = 0.17$, $SD = 1.02$, *Min.* = −1.52 (Mexico and Turkey), *Max.* = 1.47 (Portugal)].

Analysis

Linear mixed-effects models (a.k.a. multilevel modeling) were used to assess the relationship between perceived media bias and voting/political participation.[4] Random slopes models (i.e., models that allow the slope for perceived media bias to vary between countries) were fit for each outcome, followed by second-level models (i.e., models that include press freedom) and cross-level models (i.e., models that include interactions between perceived media bias and press freedom).[5] All covariates or controls are mean centered (on the overall mean), so that fixed intercepts are interpretable as the estimated grand mean of the outcome adjusted at the mean of all covariates, and fixed coefficients for perceived media bias are interpretable as differences from this estimated adjusted mean. Data are weighted by country-sample size.

Results

Results for the voting models are reported in Table 1. The first model estimates a fixed intercept of 0.73 ($SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$), which can be interpreted as the mean of voting (on a 0–1 scale) adjusted at the mean of all covariates. This mean varies between countries with a standard deviation of 0.10, indicating that the voting mean in 96% of countries in the analysis falls between 0.53 and 0.93. The model also shows a positive relationship between perceived media bias and voting ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .05$), which indicates we can expect a 2% increase in voting for each 1-unit increase in perceived media bias.

Because the bias variable is coded so that positive values indicate bias against one's views, this result can be interpreted as evidence of corrective action in the form of voting, such that individuals who perceive the media are biased against them are more likely to vote. However, this relationship does vary across countries.[6] Positive relationships are observed in 10 of the 17 country years, with the strongest effects apparently in

[4]Hypotheses were also tested in the multilevel logit framework. Dependent variables were recoded so that 1 = Any and 0 = None. Logit results are available in Supplementary Appendix B.

[5]Model comparisons were conducted to establish that the relationships between perceived media bias and voting/political participation vary across countries. Random slope models provide the best fit to the data. Random effects were specified as (1 + perceived media bias | country), which estimates a random intercept and a random slope (for perceived media bias) for each country. Models were estimated using Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML). A quasi-Newton algorithmic optimizer (one of R's standard optimizers, optim()) aided convergence.

[6]Plots of random effects for both voting and political participation are available in Supplementary Appendix A.

Spain 2004, South Africa 2014, and Hong Kong 2015. Weak negative relationships are observed in Greece 2015 and Mozambique 2004. No relationships are detected in the other five countries, including, for example, Turkey 2014 and Mexico 2012. Generally, these results support *H1*.

The second model in Table 1 shows the relationship between press freedom and voting, which is not statistically significant ($B = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, *n.s.*). However, the third model in Table 1 reports a significant cross-level interaction between perceived media bias and press freedom on voting ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .05$). This result indicates that the relationship between perceived media bias and voting depends, to some extent, on a country's level of press freedom. The general pattern of this interaction is visualized in Figure 1, which depicts the relationship between perceived media bias and voting at three levels of press freedom. Where press freedom is relatively low, there is no significant effect of perceived media bias on voting. But this relationship becomes significant and positive at medium and high levels of press freedom. Countries that exemplify this trend include Hong Kong 2015, Spain 2004, South Africa 2014, and the United States 2012. These results point toward an affirmative answer for *RQ1*: Press freedom moderates the relationship between perceived media bias and voting, such that the relationship is stronger in countries with higher levels of press freedom.

Results for the participation models are reported in the second half of Table 1. The fourth model in that table estimates a fixed intercept of 0.12 ($SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$), which, once again, can be interpreted as the grand mean on a 0–1 scale, adjusted at the mean of all covariates. This mean varies between countries with a standard deviation of 0.08, indicating that the voting mean in 96% of countries in the analysis falls between 0.00 and 0.28. The model also shows a positive relationship between perceived media bias and participation ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.00$, $p < .05$), which means that we can expect a 1% increase in participation for each 1-unit increase in perceived media bias. This result provides evidence of corrective action, such that individuals who perceive the media are biased against them are more likely to participate in politics. This relationship also varies across countries, in support of *H2*. Positive relationships are observed in 10 of the 17 country years, with the strongest effects in Colombia 2014, the Dominican Republic 2010, and Argentina 2007. Weak negative relationships are observed in Turkey 2014, the United States 2012, and South Africa 2014. No relationships are detected in the other four country years.

The fifth model in Table 1 shows the relationship between press freedom and participation, which, once again, is not statistically significant ($B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, *n.s.*). Finally, the last model in the table shows the cross-level interaction, which is also not statistically significant ($B = 0.00$, $SE = 0.00$, *n.s.*). These results point toward a negative answer for and *RQ2*: Press freedom is not related to political participation, nor does it moderate the relationship between perceived media bias and participation.

Discussion

To briefly summarize the results, analysis shows evidence of positive relationships between perceived media bias and the participation outcomes across the 17 countries in the sample. This relationship varies between countries, with most showing positive relationships and fewer showing negative relationships. Finally, press freedom explains some of the between-country variation in the relationship between perceived media bias

Table 1
The Multilevel Relationship Between Perceived Media Bias and Voting/Political Participation

Variables	Voting			Political participation		
	Random slope	Second-level	Cross-level	Random slope	Second-level	Cross-level
Intercept	.73 (.02)***	.73 (.03)***	.73 (.02)***	.12 (.02)***	.12 (.02)***	.12 (.02)***
Sex (1 = female)	.01 (.00)**	.01 (.00)**	.01 (.00)**	−.01 (.00)***	−.01 (.00)***	−.01 (.00)***
Age	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Education	.004 (.00)*	.004 (.00)*	.004 (.00)*	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Pol. interest	.05 (.00)***	.05 (.00)***	.05 (.00)***	.04 (.00)***	.04 (.00)***	.04 (.00)***
Pol. knowledge	.03 (.00)***	.03 (.00)***	.03 (.00)***	.004 (.00)***	.004 (.00)***	.004 (.00)***
Ideo. extremity	.02 (.00)***	.02 (.00)***	.02 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***
Internal efficacy	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.002 (.00)*	.002 (.00)*	.002 (.00)*
External efficacy	.01 (.00)*	.004 (.00)*	.01 (.00)*	.002 (.00)*	.002 (.00)*	.002 (.00)*
Newspaper use	.004 (.00)**	.004 (.00)**	.004 (.00)**	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***
Radio news use	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.003 (.00)***	.003 (.00)***	.003 (.00)***
TV news use	.02 (.00)***	.02 (.00)***	.02 (.00)***	−.003 (.00)***	−.003 (.00)***	−.003 (.00)***
Online news use	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***	.01 (.00)***
PMB	.02 (.01)*	.02 (.01)*	.02 (.01)**	.01 (.00)*	.01 (.00)*	.01 (.00)*
Press freedom		.00 (.01)	−.04 (.02)		−.03 (.02)	−.03 (.02)
PMB * press freedom			.02 (.01)*			−.01 (.00)
SD intercept	.10	.10	.09	.08	.07	.07
SD slope	.03	.03	.03	.02	.02	.02
SD residual	.45	.45	.45	.24	.24	.24
Log likelihood	−10583.52	−10586.91	−10588.43	3951.98	3950.29	3946.34

Note. Cell entries are coefficients and standard deviations from linear mixed effects (LME) models. $N = 22{,}835$. Groups = 17.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Ideo = ideological; PMB = perceived media bias; Pol. = political; TV = television.

and voting. The relationship is positive in countries with medium and high levels of press freedom, and it is non-existent in countries with low levels of press freedom. These results point toward two concrete conclusions. First, there is clear support for the corrective action hypothesis across countries, although it does depend on the national context in which individuals live. Second, this variability is explained by characteristics of a country's political and media systems, including press freedom.

The results fit with a growing body of evidence supporting the corrective action hypothesis. Thus far, research has focused on establishing the relationship between perceived media bias and political action (e.g., Lim & Golan, 2011; Rojas, 2010; Sun et al., 2008), and expanding the range of outcomes to include expressive and campaign-related action (Chung et al., 2015; Hart et al., 2015; Rojas et al., 2016; Wei & Golan, 2013). But, until now, research has not examined how these relationships vary across national contexts. Such an investigation is useful for building theory about corrective action because it illuminates the role that national context plays in shaping the relationship between perceived media bias and political action.

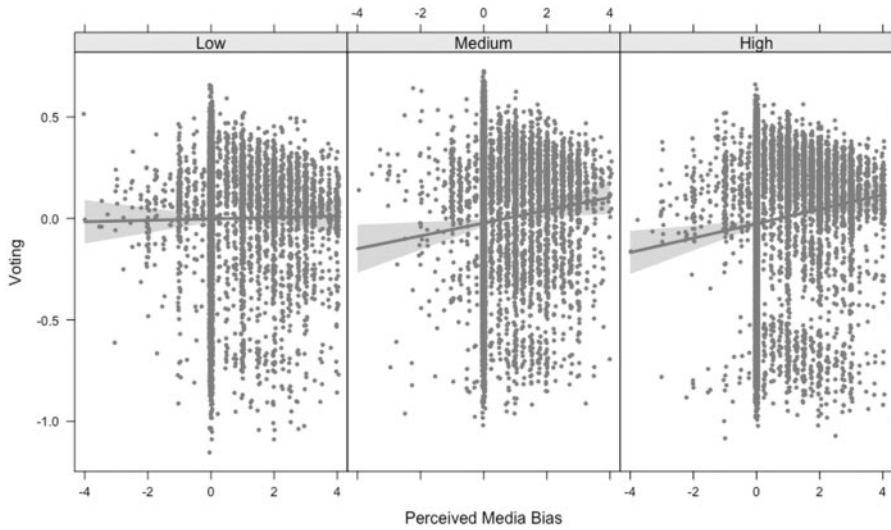
Thus, a clear extension of these findings is the idea that "perceived media bias" can take on different meanings in different national contexts (see also, Eberl et al., 2017). Survey items tapping perceptions of media bias are interpreted in light of a country's media and political systems, and therefore the meaning of responses probably differs according to differences in these systems. Naturally, the question arises about how to account for these differences using characteristics of media and political systems. While this study tested press freedom as a country-level moderator, other possibilities include technological diffusion and skills (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), presidential versus parliamentary political systems (Moe & Caldwell, 1994), and the integrity of elections (Martinez i Coma & van Ham, 2015).

These results also suggest that press freedom is an important characteristic of media and political systems that gives meaning to perceived media bias and shapes its relationship with political action. Prevailing theory suggests that people participate in politics because (a) they have the resources to do so, (b) they are motivated to do so, and (c) they have been mobilized (Verba et al., 1995). News media play an important role in shaping informational resources and mobilization efforts. To the extent that press freedom is limited, news media's ability to inform and motivate the public may also be limited. Therefore, even though individuals in these countries may perceive media bias, they may not be able or have the opportunity to participate.

Thus, press freedom may be even more important to democracy than normative theories suggest. According to ideas about representative democracy (see, e.g., Perloff, 2018), the primary role of a free press is to populate the "marketplace of ideas" with information so that citizens can engage in public debate about the best and most promising governmental policies. But the press also plays a key role in providing other kinds of information. The press informs the public about elections and other political events, as well as how to get involved in them. The press is also plays a critical role in terms of developing political efficacy (Moeller et al., 2014), which is a primary motivator of participation. Thus, the press not only plays an informational role in democratic societies, it also plays a mobilizing role.

But the influence of press freedom on political engagement has its limits. While both voting and political participation are positively related to perceived media bias, only for voting is this relationship conditional on press freedom. One reason for this

Figure 1.
Relationship between perceived media bias and voting at three levels of press freedom: low (left), medium (middle), and high (right).



discrepancy could be the difference between the two outcomes in terms of their interactivity. Prior literature has argued that one of the features of voting that sets it apart from other forms of political participation is that it is an individual act (e.g., Huckfeldt, 1979). While vote choice is certainly influenced by the social environment (Beck et al., 2002), the act of voting itself is solitary—each citizen must cast their ballot alone. By contrast, most other forms of political participation are collective acts (Huckfeldt, 1979). For example, volunteering for a campaign involves social interaction with other volunteers. This difference could help illuminate the findings of the current study. The social interaction inherent in political participation could counteract the influence of press systems—individuals may be drawn into politics regardless of the press system. Meanwhile, voting is less affected by social interaction and more influenced by press systems.

This study is limited in important ways. First, while this study has examined 17 countries, the selection of countries was not random, but rather based on the availability of resources and data. Therefore, the sample cannot be interpreted as a random sample of countries, even though the study has examined a relatively diverse array of countries. The selection method could introduce selection bias, such that only countries in which media bias is considered a salient concern were selected. However, the country means for perceived media bias were relatively low (*Min.* = 0.32, *Max.* = 1.37), and they exhibit decent variation (*Var.* = 0.09, *SD* = 0.30). Still, further research should examine key relationships in other national contexts, particularly in advanced industrialized democracies, which are underrepresented in this study. Second, the study is based on cross-sectional data, and therefore causal inferences are tentative. Rather than testing causality, a snapshot of relationships has been assembled in a particular order based on theory. Third, mean imputation was used to compensate for missingness in the dataset.

While multiple imputation can lead to biased estimation, this risk is limited by our application of the technique to countries with at least one observed item in the most important multi-item indices. That said, future research would, ideally, replicate this study with observed data on all items. Finally, the study does not directly test theoretical mechanisms. Future research could devise ways to directly test them. It could also expand upon the current study by including more countries or different time points for the same countries; and by examining different country-level factors that explain the variability in the relationship between perceived media bias and political participation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides evidence of corrective action across countries, with some variation in the strength of the relationship between perceived media bias and political action between countries. Moreover, the between-country variation in this relationship can be partially explained by a country's level of press freedom.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

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