



*Who is Driving Whom: The Media, Voters and the Bandwagon*  
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## English summary

Opinion polls of vote intentions play a prominent role in today's political campaigns. They are heavily reported on in the media, they are used by politicians to inform their strategy, and many believe they have a profound influence on voters as well. Especially, their assumed effects on voters are often criticized. When positive opinion poll results trigger additional support for a party, this is denoted as a "bandwagon effect". This dissertation has added a communication science perspective to the study of the bandwagon effect, by evaluating how poll ratings influence *party coverage*, and how exposure to *poll coverage* across a campaign influences a voter's campaign interest, emotions about parties, turnout and vote choice. These questions have been investigated using panel survey in combination with content analyses of media coverage and poll data relating to the German 2013 general (Bundestag) election campaign and the Dutch 2014 election campaign to the European Parliament. Results show that:

1. Party coverage of a front runner party increases with a decrease in its poll ratings
2. Exposure to poll coverage increases campaign interest and turnout
3. Exposure to more favorable poll coverage about a party increases the odds of voting for this party, partly because of increase in enthusiasm and decrease in anxiety felt about this party.

The combined results of the studies in this dissertation suggest two extensions of Slater's (2015) Reinforcing Spirals Model of media effects over time: media agenda building and emotions. Media react to opinion polls in their selection and tone of coverage. They are not mere transmitters of information, instead they respond according to their own logic. In doing so, media help shape the agenda from which voters draw their information and thus influence the reciprocal effects between media coverage and voters over time. Voters likewise contribute actively to the influence that polls have on the election outcomes, in part through their emotional responses to poll coverage. Voters who experienced less emotions towards parties in response to poll coverage, also were less affected by it. Over time, (the lack of) emotional responses can influence whether poll trends, presented in the media, are self-reinforcing or not.

These results highlight the many dependencies at work behind the bandwagon effect. Journalists interpret the results of polls and may use them to focus attention to a party, but so do campaign teams and other interested groups. As a consequence, the net effect of polls on party coverage differs per party, with smaller parties being neglected and larger parties being treated depending on their position in the electoral horse race. Increasing poll ratings do not translate automatically into more or more favorable media coverage. This might help explain why the overall effects found of poll coverage on voting and turnout are relatively small. Perhaps, if media coverage had responded stronger and more positively to polls, the effect of polls on turnout and voting would have been correspondingly larger. Still, in line with the bandwagon hypothesis, exposure to poll coverage was found to increase interest and turnout in the Dutch 2014 elections for the European Parliament. In addition, when the tone of that poll coverage was more positive towards a party, this reduced negative emotions and enhanced positive emotions leading to increased electoral odds for this party.

These findings relate directly to the normative discussion around polls. The main normative arguments leveled against the influence of polls in election campaigns are that poll exposure might lead to herd behavior, divert from rational deliberation in favor of emotional

processing, and that they reduce meaningful participation. The findings presented in this dissertation lend little support to either of these claims. In fact, the effect of polls on election outcomes is found to be a participatory act, resulting from the influence of various actors including politicians, pollsters, journalists, campaign teams and voters themselves. In addition, polls can stimulate interest, information search and talking about politics among voters. They do incite emotions, which in turn influence attitudes towards parties. However, as emotions and cognition are strongly intertwined, this is more likely an indication that voters are actively responding to campaign information, rather than that they are mindlessly following their herd instinct.