

# Evidence from Norway: How public broadcasters influence voting behaviour

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/09/public-broadcasters-voting-behaviour-norway/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/09/public-broadcasters-voting-behaviour-norway/)

09/02/2017

*Election campaigns frequently feature passionate debates over the impact of media coverage on decisions made by voters. Drawing on evidence from a new study, [Rune J. Sørensen](#) illustrates the impact the introduction of state television services had in Norway. His analysis suggests that in contrast to the United States, Norway's state television service was linked with a boost in turnout in elections, which demonstrates the role new media platforms can have in shaping the behaviour of voters.*



Informed voters are essential constituents of a viable democracy. It gives little meaning to cast your vote unless you know what the candidates and political parties stand for. To keep politicians accountable, voters must know what they have accomplished in office.

The introduction of new mass media does not necessarily lead to a better-informed and politically active citizenry. As Matthew Gentzkow demonstrated in a [seminal paper](#), the introduction of television in the US prompted people to switch from newspapers and radio to commercial TV, resulting apparently in a decline in political knowledge and a major drop in voter turnout.

While the US relied on commercial companies to drive television technology forward, in most European countries television was a service provided by the government. A key question is whether the European state broadcasters influenced voter information and turnout positively, and if so, was it because they had better coverage of news and political events than in the US?

## Norway as a natural experiment

The Norwegian case is typical in this respect. When parliament discussed whether to introduce a public television service, opponents pointed in horror to 'American conditions'. It was crucial that a state television service avoided the stupefying effects of commercial television, and offered serious and educational programming. Adopting the BBC as the template, Norway's public television service started in 1960.

Getting TV signals to people's homes was an expensive exercise due to Norway's mountainous terrain and its many small and rather isolated communities. It took more than two decades, and given the topography of certain places, local access to TV signals could vary randomly within the larger regions. The provision of access can therefore be analysed as a "natural experiment". The effects of television can be estimated by comparing political behaviour in smaller geographical areas before and after communities gained access to the signals.

## TV caused higher levels of voter turnout

This [analysis](#) shows that television caused an *increase* in voter turnout in the national (parliament) elections. The effects are not very large, but clearly visible in the data. Television did not give viewers much information about local politics, and it is therefore rather surprising that we see a comparable increase in turnout at local council elections. This could indicate that political coverage of national politics spills over to the local level.



Fortunately, the period during which TV signals were made available across the country has excellent survey data. The same people were interviewed at three successive national elections, facilitating a comparison of media consumption and political behaviour before and after the advent of TV in the local community.

In the US case, TV outcompeted radio and newspapers as sources of political information. Since these media provided better coverage of politics, it might explain why TV caused a drop in voter turnout. In the Norwegian case, television did replace radio as a source of political information, but, in contrast to the US, it had no adverse effect on newspaper subscriptions. This is an important point since local newspapers were – and still are – the main source of information on local politics. Television also caused a rise in political interest, with face-to-face political discussions and dissemination of knowledge.

### **State broadcasters in the new era**

Even if most people spend two to four hours every day in front of the television, the media landscape today differs dramatically from that of the 1960s. The broadcasting monopolies are long gone, and sources of political information and news are much more diverse. Importantly, newspaper circulation has dropped and private media companies are seeing their revenues decline. One might hope that the state broadcasters would rise to the challenge and attempt to counter cheaper imitation journalism, soft news and fake reporting. Public service broadcasting could therefore play an important role by providing high-quality news coverage as a public good.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: For more information on this topic, see the author's recent paper in the [British Journal of Political Science](#). This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Features image credits: [Russian government](#).*

---

### **About the author**

**Rune J. Sørensen** – *BI Norwegian Business School*

[Rune J. Sørensen](#) is Professor of Political Economy and Political Science at BI Norwegian Business School.



-