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## Are Newsjunkies More Likely to Vote? Intrinsic Need for Orientation and Voter Registration, Intention to Vote, and Voter Conscientiousness

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*This study examined the newsjunkie characteristic—intrinsic need for orientation (INFO)—as a predictor of being registered to vote, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness among a large sample of U.S. adults (N = 2,059), while controlling for media use, news consumption, political partisanship, and demographics. INFO assesses the extent to which people access news in their downtime, feel discomfort when they cannot get news, check news among the first things they do daily, and believe that following news connects them with others. The current study is the first to examine relationships between the sustained, psychological INFO trait and political participation. INFO rests upon theoretical frameworks of uses and gratifications and self-determination theory, both of which are employed in this study. INFO was positively correlated with being registered to vote, with intending to vote in the 2020 U.S. election, and with voter conscientiousness, even after controlling for numerous other variables. Additionally, INFO was still positively associated with the political participation variables after political news consumption was included as a mediator in three mediation analyses.*

**KEY WORDS:** civic participation, political participation, quantitative, survey

News is deemed essential for voters to make informed electoral decisions (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005). The press provides information to consumers, who, ideally, use that news to choose leaders and make other important decisions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Individuals differ, of course, in their interest in news, so while some laypersons are highly knowledgeable about current affairs and public policy, others are unimpressed. Some people actively avoid news, which is deemed a problem not only for news outlets but for democracy (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Ideally, citizens in democracies are interested in public issues, in consuming news about public issues, and in participating in political and civic affairs (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), but, naturally, some people have little or no interest in keeping up with news about current events (Palmer & Toff, 2020) while others consume news so frequently their behavior is described with quasi-pathological nomenclature.

The word *newsjunkie* commonly describes someone who constantly checks and consumes news, like a hit of a chemical substance, and some heavy consumers of news also use the term *newsjunkie*

to describe themselves (Incollingo, 2018). In fact, saying “I’m a newsjunkie” can represent something of a self-compliment—a way to say “I’m informed about, and care about, public issues” (Hebert, 2018).

News is not only helpful to voters making decisions; research has found that news consumption is associated with an increased likelihood to vote (Drew & Weaver, 2006; Scherman & Arriagada, 2012), as well as with political participation generally and with other forms of civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Yet, news media suffer from low levels of public trust (Brenan, 2020) and are called the “enemy of the people” by populist rulers (Fawzi, 2019). *Newsjunkie* may be a compliment, but news, in some circles, is a dirty word; an individual’s decision to “turn off the news” is often met with public applause (Doyle, 2020).

It is important to test, then, whether newsjunkies, the most avid consumers of news, are more or less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors. If newsjunkies are more likely to vote in democratic elections, then perhaps the overconsumption of news is not, or is at least less, problematic. This study assessed whether the newsjunkie characteristic, intrinsic need for orientation (INFO), is correlated with being registered to vote, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness (a feeling of guilt for not voting), after controlling for news consumption, political partisanship, demographics, and other factors. This is the first study to probe relationships between the sustained psychological trait of INFO and political participation. The study also considers the ways INFO differs from extant measures in political psychology and political communication, such as need to evaluate, political sophistication, and interest in politics.

If INFO correlates significantly and positively with political participation, there are implications for research on both political behaviors and on news consumption, as well as practical implications for civic-oriented organizations and programs, which may be able to increase voter turnout by fostering individuals’ interest in keeping up with news. More than just finding ways to increase news consumption among the public, promoting news consumption *as a habit* may contribute to increased public political participation.

### News Consumption and Political Participation

This study hypothesized that the newsjunkie trait, INFO, is positively correlated with political participation, after controlling for numerous measures of news consumption, including political news consumption. Before arriving at that hypothesis, it is necessary to review literatures on news consumption and political participation. Broadly, news consumption has often been found to positively predict political participation and civic engagement (Ksiazek et al., 2010), and studies have observed this relationship for both online news (Boulianne, 2009), as well as legacy formats. Heavy consumers of news express a stronger intention to vote than do light or non-news consumers (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Kenamer, 1987).

In the United States, newspaper use was positively associated with voting in the 1992 presidential election (Simon, 1996). In that study, though, TV, magazine, and radio news use were not correlated with voting. Kenamer found that TV news use directly predicted intention to vote, and newspaper use did so indirectly. More recently, Martin (2015) found that mobile news use about the 2010 U.S. midterm elections was positively associated with intention to vote.

Meanwhile, some news use is associated with political cynicism (Elenbaas & de Vreese, 2008), which is generally deemed a barrier to political participation and may help generate calls to “turn off the news.” A few studies found news use not positively correlated with intention to vote (Groshek & Dimitrova, 2011). Lengauer and Höller (2012) found that not only was news exposure not positively associated with voting in Austria, exposure to superficial horse-race coverage was associated with reduced likelihood to vote. Gentzkow (2006) found that watching TV, though not news exclusively, negatively predicted voter turnout in the United States.

Still, most studies of news use and political participation have found positive associations between the two. Prior (2005) claimed that researchers observe different relationships between media use and political participation due to media choice. He found that people who preferred news content were more likely to vote than those who preferred entertainment.

Prior used “news junkie” to describe people who prefer news over entertainment in high-choice media milieus (Prior, 2007), although it is possible for someone to prefer news to entertainment and still be a light consumer of news, that is, not a newsjunkie in the way the term is commonly used. The INFO measure assesses broad motivation to keep up with news and is agnostic with regard to entertainment use. Indeed, someone with a strong INFO could be motivated to consume news about entertainment, celebrities, or to consume social or political satire. And the line between news and entertainment is often unclear, given the popularity of infotainment, “where the dualism of entertainment and information is dissolved, leading to a ... mix of formats” (Otto et al., 2017, p. 145).

Norris (1996) found that newspaper use and TV news consumption positively predicted voting, monetary campaign donations, and protesting. Eveland and Scheufele (2000) found that newspaper use positively predicted voting and political participation. Weaver and Drew (2001) found that using newspapers to read campaign news during a Presidential campaign positively predicted likelihood of voting. Bolstering Norris’s findings, Zhang and Chia (2006) reported that spending more time reading newspapers and watching public affairs TV positively predicted political participation, but time spent watching entertainment TV and spending time online were not associated with political participation.

News consumption is part of public participation—participation in public conversations. The INFO measure includes an item assessing one’s sense that news helps them “better connect” with others. Another item in the index measures discomfort respondents feel when they cannot access news, discomfort that could be the result of newsjunkies not knowing things that members of their news community(ies) know; Palmer and Toff (2020) found that news avoiders lack connection to news communities. Previous studies have found that “listening” to public conversations, by consuming news, predicts political participation (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) found that using social media for information positively predicted political participation. Such research highlights that news use is connected to social relationships.

### Intrinsic Need for Orientation

Intrinsic need for orientation is an individual’s motivation to keep up with news about current events and to avoid falling behind in awareness of what’s in the news (Martin, 2020). Both the INFO definition and its operationalization emphasize the importance of habit in tracking news and also the anxiety newsjunkies feel when they fall behind in news consumption, much like a workaholic or fitness enthusiast feels discomfort when detached from their regimens. INFO is “An individual’s motivation to routinely and frequently seek and consume news, for the positive emotions of feeling informed and to avoid negative emotions of feeling behind” (p. 6).

There are two components of the INFO measure that distinguish it from news-consumption frequency: habit and social connections affected by news awareness. Just as workaholicism describes a person’s work habits—not only the amount of hours they work—the newsjunkie measure assesses the habits of getting news first thing each day and in one’s leisure time. INFO also assesses the extent that people feel consuming news connects them to other people and the extent that they feel discomfort when they cannot access news. While INFO is positively correlated with news consumption frequency, the correlations fall short of multicollinearity.

Need for orientation was first conceived by McCombs and Weaver (1973) to describe an individual’s motivation to keep up with news. “Each individual,” they wrote, “feels some need to be

familiar with [their] surroundings ... each individual will strive to 'map' [their] world, to fill in enough detail to orient [themselves]" (p. 3). They described NFO as a general desire to be familiar with one's environment.

However, they measured the concept as the combination of interest in a political election and a *weak* political party attachment; they said people with weak party ties desire more news to make an otherwise uncertain voting decision (Camaj & Weaver, 2013). Political party identification and interest in an election represent a narrow way to measure individuals' affinity for news; someone can be deeply interested in financial news, for example, and have no interest in an election. In the current study, consuming financial news was *negatively* associated with intention to vote. And how does one measure NFO in years between major elections? Most problematic, the U.S.-centric McCombs and Weaver (1973) calculus obviates measuring NFO in countries that do not have political parties and/or elections.

More recently, Matthes (2005) created an index measuring need for orientation, but here also, its operationalization falls short of the original, broad definition of NFO as a psychological trait. Matthes's scale measures interest in getting news about a topic, and, while not restricted to a U.S. election, is thus limiting. Someone can be uninterested in news generally but express a strong interest in news of, say, singly, gun control, and yet, assessed with Matthes's scale, that person could be said to have a strong, general NFO.

Martin (2020) argued that both prior measurements of NFO were too specific and created a four-item index to measure the broad intrinsic need to track news. The INFO index asks respondents about getting news in their down time, about news consumption being among the first things they do each day, about discomfort when they are cut off from news, and whether consuming news makes them feel more connected to others. The INFO measure assesses the strength of individuals' general interest in following news.

Is INFO just another measure of need for cognition—"the dispositional tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Olson et al., 1984, p. 71). Martin et al. (2020), examined this proposition and found that there was a modest correlation between INFO and NFC (.27), but it was too weak to suggest that INFO and NFC measure the same thing. NFC measures things like enjoyment of solving puzzles and cogitating for long periods of time.

The INFO measure also differs from extant concepts in political psychology such as need to evaluate, political sophistication, and interest in politics. Need to evaluate largely assesses individuals' tendency to form judgments on matters as good or bad (see Jarvis & Petty, 1996, p. 176). Need to evaluate presents items like, "I pay a lot of attention to whether things are good or bad," and "I have many more opinions than the average person." INFO assesses individuals' motivation to follow the latest news, rather than an interest in forming opinions. Like need for cognition, it is possible the need to evaluate is positively associated with INFO, but facially the two concepts assess separate motivations.

The INFO measure does not mention politics or consumption of political news, and thus it differs from interest in politics. In the current study, we control for frequency of consuming political news, which has been used in prior studies to measure interest in politics (Peterson et al., 2020), like Gallup's "How closely do you follow news about national politics?" A newsjunkie may have a strong interest in politics, but someone who checks news frequently could also be interested in financial news, international affairs, sports outcomes, gambling or wagering results, or news about any number of hobbies or topics.

Political sophistication is a compound measure of demographic variables like education, age, professional occupation, as well as interest in politics, intelligence scores, and exposure to political information in print media (Luskin, 1990). Alongside INFO, the current study controls for age, education, interest in politics (as frequency of consumption of political news), and being employed versus unemployed, and multicollinearity coefficients indicated INFO is distinct from these factors.

Additionally, a measure like “exposure to political information” is passive, while INFO, by asking respondents whether they check news first thing each day, and in their downtime, assesses active news seeking.

To date, INFO has been found valid and reliable in studies in multiple countries and in two languages; Martin and Hassan (2020) fielded the measure in multiple Arab countries in both Arabic and English. The measure also yielded robust reliability (Cronbach's  $>.83$ ) in the United States (Martin et al., 2020).

### **Ties to Uses and Gratifications and Self-Determination Theory**

Theoretically, INFO is rooted in uses and gratifications and self-determination theory. Uses and gratifications holds that specific motivations drive people to use media, the motivations differ among people, the motivations moderate effects that media exert on people, and mass media compete for consumers' time and attention (Rubin, 2002). The INFO index reflects the core tenets of the uses and gratifications perspective. Some consumers seek a certain amount of news each day to feel informed and to avoid feeling behind, while others do not have this motivation. News competes with other media and with nonmedia activities for consumers' attention and time, and the INFO measure accounts for the fact that consumers must often steal a look at news or news headlines when they can.

INFO also rests on self-determination theory, which holds that intrinsic behaviors are solidified via three psychological components (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000): competence, autonomy, connectedness. Competence is an individuals' belief that they get better at a task as they practice it. Autonomy is one's sense that they perform a task on their own and are not forced to do it by someone or something (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Connectedness is the feeling that performing a task enhances one's ties to others, often other people who are interested in the same activity, like members of a “news community” (see Palmer & Toff, 2020).

The INFO index reflects each of Ryan and Deci's components of intrinsic motivation: “Keeping up with news makes me feel more connected to other people” (connectedness); “I feel discomfort when I don't know what's going on in the world” (competence); “When I have down time I check news”; and “One of the first things I do each day is check news” (autonomy).

In the current study, the theorized direction of the INFO trait and voting is that INFO positively predicts political participation (particularly since one of the outcome variables is the intention to vote in a future election), although political participation may also strengthen the INFO characteristic. Indeed, a voter may feel heightened competence, autonomy, or connectedness after casting a ballot, which may strengthen their intrinsic drive to follow news. The possible multidirectional nature of this relationship is considered subsequently in this article, and we do not claim a unidirectional causal effect of INFO on political participation, and our data do not assess temporal precedence.

### **Hypotheses and Research Question**

This study hypothesized that persons with a strong intrinsic need for orientation (INFO) are more likely to be registered to vote, to intend to vote, and to feel guilty if they do not vote, than respondents with a weak INFO, after controlling for news consumption frequency, social media use, political partisanship, and demographics, among a large, representative sample of resident U.S. adults (2,059).

Previous research has found that news consumption is positively associated with political participation, specifically voting. Beyond just news consumption, the current study holds that the motivation to keep up with news will also positively predict political participation:



*H1*: INFO will be positively correlated with *being registered to vote*, after controlling for news consumption (including political news consumption), social media use, political partisanship, and demographics.

*H2*: INFO will be positively correlated with *intention to vote*, after controlling for news consumption, social media use, political partisanship, and demographics.

Part of the INFO measure is a form of civic conscientiousness: discomfort that arises from not knowing what is happening in the news. Interestingly, Palmer and Toff (2020) found the civic obligation to consume news wholly absent among news avoiders. Voter conscientiousness, then, a feeling of guilt arising from not voting in an election, relates to INFO, and to Deci and Ryan (1991)'s concept of competence as a component of intrinsic motivation. A strong INFO should positively predict guilt following failing to vote. These theoretical components drive Hypothesis 3:

*H3*: INFO will be positively correlated with *voter conscientiousness*, after controlling for news consumption, social media use, political partisanship, and demographics.

We do not claim in the current study that news consumption frequency will no longer correlate positively with political participation while controlling for INFO, only that INFO is a variable distinct from news consumption frequency, and that *both* INFO and news consumption frequency will positively predict political participation. A corpus of research cited above, including de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006), found that news consumption frequency is associated with increased political participation. Hypothesis 4, therefore, holds:

*H4*: News consumption frequency will be positively associated with being registered to vote, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness, after controlling for INFO, social media use, political partisanship, and demographics.

Multiple prior studies have used political news consumption as a measure of interest in politics (see Peterson et al., 2020), and we included political news consumption in the regression models assessing relationships between INFO and political participation. We also tested the relationship between INFO and political participation when political news consumption is evaluated as a mediating variable:

**RQ1**: Does INFO still positively predict the three political outcome variables after political news consumption is added in mediation analyses as a mediating variable?

## Method

This study examined whether intrinsic need for orientation predicts political participation among a nationally representative sample of resident U.S. adults ages 18 and older ( $N = 2,059$ ).

### *Survey Data Collection and Context*

The survey was commissioned by this study's authors. Data were collected September 9–10, 2020, about eight weeks prior to the U.S. presidential election of November 3. Thus, it is important to reiterate that, since data were collected prior to the 2020 presidential election, the survey did not assess whether respondents voted, but rather their intention (propensity) to vote. We did compare our

INFO data to 2019 data from a prior researcher and found no difference in INFO scores when data were collected proximate to the 2020 election.

The Harris Poll collected the data via its Harris On Demand (HOD) omnibus survey, a twice-weekly online survey of verified respondents. Respondents are paid for participating and must complete the survey, so there are no missing data (although for education we did not include “job training programs after high school,” so the minimum N in regression models was 1965, and was 2,059 for other variables. The survey was paid for by funds from the authors’ institution. The IRB to which the authors report did not consider the survey to be human-subjects research, as The Harris Poll does not provide markers that could identify any respondent. Propensity weighting was used to estimate respondents’ propensity to be online, and data were also rim-weighted by age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, geographic region, and household income to bring these characteristics closer to figures present in census data. Demographics for the sample are in Appendix S2 in the online supporting information.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election featured then-President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence versus challengers Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and Biden-Harris won. The survey was executed September 9–10, in the main period of the campaign—after Labor Day and before the first televised presidential debate between Trump and Biden. By September 9, the U.S. death count from COVID-19 was approaching 200,000 people and the U.S. economy was suffering from high unemployment and slow growth (Maan, 2020; Schwartz & Friedman, 2020). Biden was beating Trump at that time in both national polls and polls in key battleground states (Page & Elbeshbishi, 2020).

### *Dependent Variables*

#### *Registered to Vote, Intention to Vote, Voter Conscientiousness*

While multiquestion indices are sometimes preferable to single-item measures, the latter have been shown to provide the same strength in predictive validity as multi-item measures when the questions are clear and unambiguous (Bergkvist, 2015; Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). The outcome variables in the current study are clear and unambiguous.

**Registered to vote.** “Are you currently registered to vote?” 1 (*registered*); 0 (*not registered*). **Intention to vote.** “How likely is it that you will vote this November in the presidential election?” 1 (*very unlikely*); 2 (*somewhat unlikely*); 3 (*somewhat likely*); 4 (*very likely*). **Voter conscientiousness.** “I feel guilty if an election passes and I didn’t vote.” 1 (*strongly disagree*); 2 (*somewhat disagree*); 3 (*neither agree/disagree*); 4 (*somewhat agree*); 5 (*strongly agree*). The voter conscientiousness measure was adapted from Pew (2012, p. 107): “I feel guilty when I don’t get a chance to vote.” We adjusted the question’s wording, as it presumes respondents do not vote in at least one election.

### *Independent Variables*

#### *Intrinsic Need for Orientation*

Four items; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ . (1) “One of the first things I do each day is check the news”; (2) “When I have downtime I check news or news headlines”; (3) “I feel discomfort when I don’t know what’s going on in the world”; (4) “Keeping up with the news makes me feel more connected to other people.”

In addition to the INFO measure, three groupings of variables were used in this study as potential predictors of voter registration, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness: news consumption frequency, social media use, political partisanship, and demographics.



Intrinsic need for orientation is distinct from frequency measures of news consumption. Appendix S1 in the online supporting information shows Pearson correlations for INFO and news use variables. The correlations are positive and significant, but they do not come close to exhibiting multicollinearity, which was also verified in the multicollinearity analyses in regression models. INFO and news consumption are not correlated strongly enough to suggest they are the same measure. Indeed, the INFO subcomponents that assess discomfort from being cut off from news and whether getting news better connects them to others are not measures of news consumption frequency. INFO is a measure of the motivation to get the current, or the next bit of, news.

### *News Consumption Frequency*

Included are three different kinds of news use variables: consumption of news via specific medium, such as TV and newspaper and so on; consumption of specific news topics, like political and business news; and consumption of partisan and less partisan news, such as via FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN.

*Digital News* Three-item additive index: (1) “How frequently do you get news or news headlines on any of the following?” 1 (*never*); 6 (*several times/day*). (Cronbach’s = .54). Asked for each smartphone, computer, tablet. While this alpha is not as high as the other indices used in this study, .54 is acceptable for use as an independent variable (see Berendsen et al., 2020). *TV news*. Prompt/responses same as for digital news. *Radio news*. Prompt/responses the same as for digital news. *Newspaper*. Prompt/responses the same as for digital news.

*Political news consumption* A proxy for interest in politics. “How often do you get the following types of news?” -Political. 1 (*never*); 6 (*several times/day*). Peterson et al. (2020) highlighted several prior studies that use political news consumption as a measure of interest in politics, and we also employ such a measure to ensure that INFO is sufficiently divergent from interest in politics.

*Business/Financial News Consumption* Economic indicators in the United States were dire in the run-up to the 2020 election, as the United States was in a COVID-induced recession, and so business news consumption is included. Prompt and responses are the same as for political news.

*Conservative news use* “Do you get news from FOX News or OAN [One America News Network] more than once in a typical week? 1 (*yes*); 0 (*no*). *Liberal news use*. Do you get news from MSNBC more than once in a typical week? 1 (*yes*); 0 (*no*). *Less partisan news use*. Do you get news from CNN more than once in a typical week? 1 (*yes*); 0 (*no*). While it is generally accepted that FOX News leans conservative/Republican and MSNBC leans liberal/Democratic, instead of employing CNN use as a proxy for, say, “centrist” news consumption, we use the label “less partisan,” for, while CNN may be considered less ideological than FOX or MSNBC, it nonetheless trends toward MSNBC on certain issues (Feldman et al., 2012). Note that, while these news organizations are primarily TV outlets, we do not specify TV use, as the organizations also have wide-ranging radio and online presences.

### *Social Media Use*

Particularly in an election in which voters could cast ballots by mail a month or more before Election Day in some states, social media users may see others posting selfies at the U.S. post office

after mailing a ballot, wearing “I Voted” stickers, or otherwise describing how they voted or how they plan to submit their vote. Social media use may be positively associated with the outcome variables.

*Facebook* “How frequently do you use each of the following social media platforms?” Facebook; 1 (*never*); 6 (*several times a day*). *Other social media use*. Four-item additive index (Cronbach’s = .79). “How frequently do you use each of the following social media platforms?” Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Twitter. 1 (*never*); 6 (*several times a day*). We originally included these variables *separately* in the regression models, but they are so highly correlated with one another that it necessitated combining them into one measure. *Time spent online*. “Please indicate how much time you spend on the internet in an average week.” 1 (*less than one hour*); 5 (*20 hours or more*).

### *Political Partisanship*

*Party Identification* Regardless of how you may vote, what do you usually consider yourself? Coded into two separate dummy variables: 1 (*Republican*); 0 (*all others*); 1 (*Democrats*); 0 (*all others*). Reference group (*Independent/Others*).

*Political ideology* “How would you describe your own political philosophy?” Dummy variables: 1 (*conservative*); 0 (*all others*); 1 (*liberal*); 0 (*all others*). Reference group (*Moderates*).

### *Demographic Variables*

*Age* “What is your age?” Ratio-level measure. *Gender*. 1 (*male*); 2 (*female*). *Education*. “What is the highest level of education you completed, or the highest degree you received?” 1 (*less than high school*); 8 (*completed graduate school [M.S., M.D., or Ph.D., etc.]*). *Unemployed*. “What is your unemployment status?” 1 (*Not employed but looking for work*); 0 (*other*). *Urban resident*. “Which of the following best describes where you live?” 1 (*urban*); 0 (*nonurban*). *Income*. “Which of the following categories best describes your annual household income before taxes?” 1 (*less than \$15,000*); 11 (*\$250,000 or more*). *Race/ethnicity*. Four dummy variables: 1 (*respondent identifies as white*); 0 (*all others*); 1 (*respondent identifies as Black/African American*); 0 (*all others*); 1 (*respondent identifies as Asian/Pacific Islander*); 0 (*all others*); 1 (*respondent identifies as Hispanic/Latinx*). Reference group (*other*).

### *Analyses*

Analyses were run in SPSS 27. Binary logistic regression analyzed potential predictors of being registered to vote. Nagelkerke  $R^2$  is reported for that logistic regression model, as Nagelkerke’s  $R^2$  is the closest proxy to adjusted  $R^2$  in least-squares regression. Multiple linear regressions were run to examine predictors of intention to vote and voter conscientiousness. Pairwise exclusion of cases was used. Multicollinearity tolerance was set at .20, and none of the predictor variables in the models violated that threshold.

Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables in the study are provided in Appendix S2 in the online supporting information. To answer RQ1, we conducted three mediation analyses in SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2017) between INFO, political news consumption, and each of the three political participation outcome variables. We chose political news consumption primarily because it turned out to be the strongest specific news use predictor of political participation.

Additionally, Peterson et al. (2020) showed political news consumption has been used in multiple prior studies to measure interest in politics.

Simple tests of significance for INFO and each of the three outcome variables were run as well: an independent-samples *t*-test for INFO among registered versus unregistered voters and Pearson correlations between INFO and each intention to vote and voter conscientiousness. Registered voters reported stronger INFO scores ( $M = 14.85$ ,  $SD = 3.73$ ) than unregistered voters ( $M = 12.35$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ );  $t(364.57) = 9.25$ ,  $p = .002$ , and INFO was positively correlated with intention to vote ( $r = .314$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and with voter conscientiousness ( $r = .468$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, in Appendix S3 in the online supporting information, we report the individual associations between all of the predictor variables and each of the three political participation variables separately.

**Table 1.** Logistic Regression Predictors of Being Registered to Vote

	Unstandard. B	Odds Rat.	Sig.	95% C.I.-Odds
<i>Intrinsic Need For Orientation</i>	<b>.055</b>	<b>1.056</b>	<b>.015</b>	<b>1.011–1.104</b>
<i>News consumption measures</i>				
Digital news	.030	1.030	.242	.980–1.083
TV news	.014	1.014	.793	.916–1.122
Radio news	.081	1.103	.103	.984–1.196
Newspaper	–.015	.986	.795	.883–1.100
Political-news consumption	<b>.295</b>	<b>1.343</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>1.204–1.498</b>
Business/financial news consumption	–.104	.902	.079	.803–1.012
Conservative news use	.058	1.060	.729	.764–1.470
Less partisan news use	–.288	.750	.121	.521–1.079
Liberal news use	.184	1.203	.440	.753–1.920
<i>Social media use</i>				
Facebook use	.012	1.012	.785	.930–1.100
Other social media use	.037	1.037	.069	.997–1.079
Time spent online	–.042	.959	.520	.843–1.090
<i>Political partisanship</i>				
Republican	<b>.779</b>	<b>2.179</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>1.451–3.273</b>
Democrat	<b>.768</b>	<b>2.155</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>1.470–3.160</b>
Independent/Others (Reference group)				
Conservative	–.172	.842	.370	.577–1.227
Liberal	–.239	.787	.249	.524–1.182
Moderates (Reference group)				
<i>Demographics</i>				
Age	<b>.029</b>	<b>1.029</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>1.017–1.041</b>
Gender	–.063	.939	.699	.684–1.290
Education	<b>.299</b>	<b>1.348</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>1.222–1.488</b>
Unemployed	<b>–.694</b>	<b>.500</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.316–.791</b>
Urban resident	<b>.424</b>	<b>1.529</b>	<b>.019</b>	<b>1.072–2.179</b>
Income	–.001	.999	.847	.992–1.006
White	–.121	.886	.695	.484–1.622
Black/African American	–.489	.613	.162	.309–1.216
Asian or Pacific Islander	<b>–1.160</b>	<b>.313</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>.150–.655</b>
Hispanic/Latinx	<b>–1.329</b>	<b>.265</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.126–.557</b>
Nagelkerke $R^2 = .34$ ; $N = 1916$				

The bold values denote those independent variables that statistically significantly predict the dependent variables (voter registration, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness) in each regression model.

## Results

This study examined intrinsic need for orientation as a predictor of political participation among a representative sample of U.S. adults ( $N = 2,059$ ).

H1 said INFO would positively correlate with *being registered to vote*, after controlling for news consumption (including political news consumption), social media use, political partisanship, and demographics. H1 was supported. Table 1 shows odds ratios and  $p$ -values for the logistic regression model predicting voter registration. The odds of being registered to vote are significantly greater among respondents with a strong INFO, even after controlling for numerous news consumption frequency measures and other variables, than among respondents with a weak INFO.

Other predictors of being registered to vote were demographic: Identifying as Asian or as Hispanic/Latinx were both negatively associated with being registered to vote. The strongest news consumption predictor of being registered to vote was consuming political news (positive).

H2 said INFO would be positively correlated with *intention to vote*, after controlling for the other variables. H2 was supported. Table 2 shows standardized betas for the model predicting intention to

**Table 2.** Predictors of Intention to Vote (standardized betas and  $p$ -values)

	Beta	Sig.
<i>Intrinsic Need For Orientation</i>	<b>.152</b>	<b>.000</b>
<i>News consumption measures</i>		
Digital news	-.031	.250
TV news	-.044	.066
Radio news	<b>.053</b>	<b>.020</b>
Newspaper	-.031	.194
Political-news consumption	<b>.197</b>	<b>.000</b>
Business/financial news consumption	<b>-.059</b>	<b>.026</b>
Conservative news use	.018	.387
Less partisan news use	-.034	.135
Liberal news use	-.013	.540
<i>Social media use</i>		
Facebook use	<b>.067</b>	<b>.002</b>
Other social media use	.055	.060
Time spent online	<b>.044</b>	<b>.031</b>
<i>Political partisanship</i>		
Republican	<b>.133</b>	<b>.000</b>
Democrat	<b>.140</b>	<b>.000</b>
Independent/Others (Reference group)		
Conservative	-.059	.009
Liberal	-.010	.650
Moderates (Reference group)		
<i>Demographics</i>		
Age	<b>.203</b>	<b>.000</b>
Gender (female)	<b>.045</b>	<b>.029</b>
Education	<b>.162</b>	<b>.000</b>
Unemployed	<b>-.041</b>	<b>.042</b>
Urban resident	-.031	.125
Income	-.014	.464
White	.034	.330
Black/African American	-.001	.972
Asian or Pacific Islander	-.039	.112
Hispanic/Latinx	<b>-.049</b>	<b>.049</b>
Minimal $N = 1965$ ; Maximum $N = 2059$ ; Adjusted $R^2 = 27.2\%$		

The bold values denote those independent variables that statistically significantly predict the dependent variables (voter registration, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness) in each regression model.

**Table 3.** Predictors of Voter Conscientiousness (standardized betas and p-values)

	Beta	Sig.
<i>Intrinsic Need For Orientation</i>	<b>.354</b>	<b>.000</b>
<i>News consumption measures</i>		
Digital news	-.038	.145
TV news	.032	.176
Radio news	-.029	.198
Newspaper	.016	.504
Political-news consumption	<b>.139</b>	<b>.000</b>
Business/financial news consumption	-.019	.469
Conservative news use	-.018	.383
Less partisan news use	<b>-.061</b>	<b>.006</b>
Liberal news use	-.022	.292
<i>Social media use</i>		
Facebook use	.036	.082
Other social media use	.030	.291
Time spent online	.012	.542
<i>Political partisanship</i>		
Republican	<b>.067</b>	<b>.005</b>
Democrat	<b>.063</b>	<b>.010</b>
Independent/Others (Reference group)		
Conservative	.022	.308
Liberal	<b>.044</b>	<b>.045</b>
Moderates (Reference group)		
<i>Demographics</i>		
Age	<b>.136</b>	<b>.000</b>
Gender	<b>.042</b>	<b>.034</b>
Education	<b>.091</b>	<b>.000</b>
Unemployed	<b>-.051</b>	<b>.009</b>
Urban resident	.028	.160
Income	-.021	.264
White	<b>.085</b>	<b>.011</b>
Black/African American	.040	.167
Asian or Pacific Islander	.019	.428
Hispanic/Latinx	-.001	.957

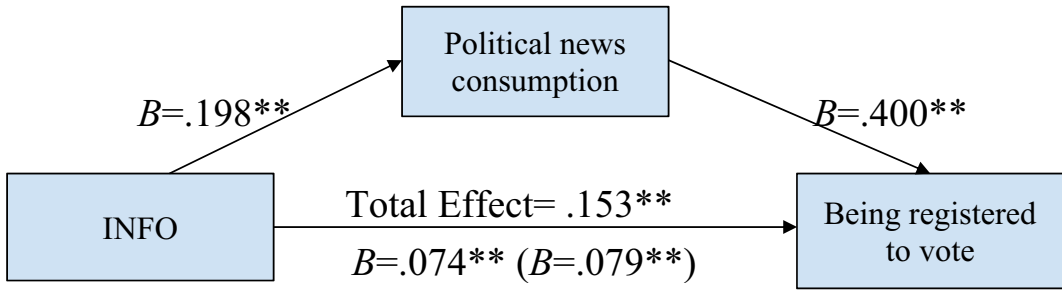
Minimal  $N = 1965$ ; Maximum  $N = 2059$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 30.9\%$

The bold values denote those independent variables that statistically significantly predict the dependent variables (voter registration, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness) in each regression model.

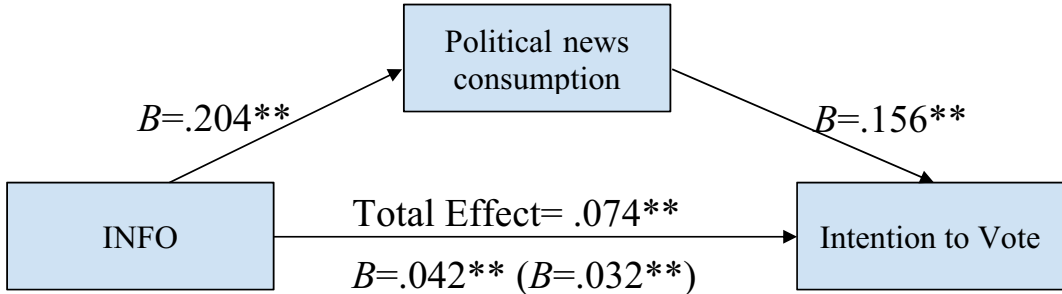
vote. INFO was one of the strongest, positive correlates of intention to vote. A one standard-deviation increase in INFO was associated with a .15 standard-deviation increase in intention to vote, with other variables constant. After INFO, the only stronger positive predictors of intention to vote were age, education, and political news consumption. Table 2 shows several other positive and negative marginal predictors of intention to vote. Adjusted  $R^2$  for the model was a sizable .272.

H3 said INFO would be positively correlated with *voter conscientiousness*, after controlling for the other variables in the model. H3 was supported. INFO was the strongest predictor of voter conscientiousness. Table 3 shows standardized betas for variables predicting voter conscientiousness. A one standard-deviation increase in INFO was associated with a .35 standard-deviation increase in voter conscientiousness, *ceteris paribus*. There were two other predictors in the model with standardized betas  $> .10$ : age and political news consumption. Adjusted  $R^2$  for the model was a sizable .309.

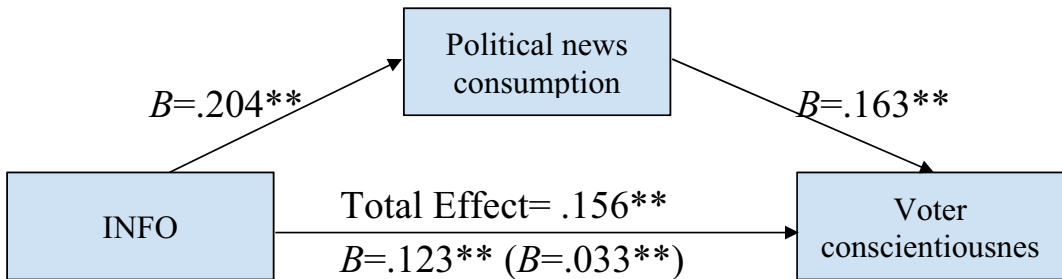
H4 said news consumption frequency would positively correlate with being registered to vote, intention to vote, and voter conscientiousness. H4 was partly supported. While consumption of news via TV, digital devices (smartphone, computer, tablet), and newspapers were not associated with the political participation variables, political news consumption positively and strongly predicted the



1a. There is a direct relationship between INFO and being registered to vote, and also an indirect relationship via political news consumption.



1b. There is a direct relationship between INFO and intention to vote, and also an indirect relationship via political news consumption.



1c. There is a direct relationship between INFO and voter conscientiousness, and also an indirect relationship via political news consumption.

Figure 1. Mediation analyses.

dependent variables. Business news consumption was negatively associated with intention to vote, albeit weakly. Radio news consumption was a positive predictor of intention to vote, but also weakly. Multicollinearity coefficients for INFO and news consumption frequency measures did not surpass the tolerance threshold of concern of .20, indicating that they are distinct measures.

RQ1 asked whether INFO still correlates positively with the political participation variables after political news consumption was added as a mediating variable in each of three mediation analyses (Figure 1). It does. Partial mediations were observed in all three models. After the mediator of political news consumption was added to each model, INFO still positively and significantly predicted



being registered to vote ( $B = .079$ ,  $t(1992) = 8.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), intention to vote ( $B = .032$ ,  $t(2059) = 10.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and voter conscientiousness ( $B = .033$ ,  $t(2059) = 8.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Ignoring the mediator, direct, positive effects of INFO on each being registered to vote ( $B = .074$ ,  $Z(1992) = 4.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .083$ ), intention to vote ( $B = .042$ ,  $t(2059) = 7.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .093$ ), and voter conscientiousness ( $B = .123$ ,  $t(2059) = 16.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .213$ ) were also observed. For the model predicting the binary variable of registered to vote, a Z-value was computed because the outcome variable was categorical. Additionally, INFO also positively predicted the mediating variable political news consumption in the models assessing being registered to vote ( $B = .198$ ,  $t(1992) = 24.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .237$ ), intention to vote ( $B = .204$ ,  $t(2059) = 25.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .243$ ), and voter conscientiousness ( $B = .204$ ,  $t(2059) = 25.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .244$ ), and political news consumption, in turn, positively predicted each of the three DVs.

Is it possible that respondents in the survey reported a stronger INFO than they otherwise would because the data were collected eight weeks before a U.S. election? We have evidence that this is not so, and that the INFO characteristic is stable over time, at least at the national level. We compared INFO scores from Martin et al. (2020)'s December 2019 U.S. data ( $M = 14.51$ ,  $SD = 3.88$ ;  $N = 2017$ ) to INFO in our 2020 U.S. data ( $M = 14.38$ ,  $SD = 3.95$ ), and found no significant difference;  $t(4,074) = 1.062$ ,  $p = .288$ . Eight weeks before a presidential election, INFO scores appear to not have changed from their prior values among the U.S. population.

### Discussion, Limitations, Subsequent Research

This study found that newsjunkies—persons with a strong intrinsic need for orientation (INFO)—were more likely to be registered to vote, to intend to vote in a U.S. election, and reported higher levels of voter conscientiousness than persons with a weak INFO, after controlling for numerous other variables, including news use measures like political news consumption. INFO was a significant positive correlate of all three outcome variables, and it was the strongest predictor of voter conscientiousness and one of the strongest predictors of intention to vote. Moreover, with INFO in the regression models, few news-consumption frequency measures predicted the political participation variables, with the exception of political news consumption. In mediation models examining INFO as a predictor of each of the three DVs, INFO still positively predicted the political participation variables after political news consumption, a proxy for interest in politics, was added to each model.

INFO is a concept within the uses and gratifications of mass media paradigm and also self-determination theory. The findings add a new predictive element to the uses and gratifications perspective, as INFO was positively associated with the intention to vote. Due to the way McCombs and Weaver (1973) operationally defined need for orientation—as interest in an election that features political parties—researchers of need for orientation have, since the 1970s, largely used second-level agenda setting to scaffold their work. The INFO concept, however, more appropriately connects the need to keep up with news to the uses and gratifications perspective; indeed, people with a strong INFO are likely gratified when they feel sufficiently informed. To scholars of self-determination theory, the findings represent an additional example of competence, autonomy, and connectedness contributing to consequential, civic-oriented behaviors.

The findings emphasize the importance of including INFO in future research on political behaviors, particularly that which examines relationships between news consumption and political participation. The motivation to keep up with news about current events may be more useful in predicting voting behaviors than some measures of news consumption frequency. Not only will researchers in political psychology and political communication benefit by using INFO in studies on media use and political participation, but also scholars in communication, journalism, political science, and other fields.

A few measures of social media use were positively associated with the outcome variables, albeit weakly. Identifying as a Republican or as a Democrat were both strong predictors of being registered to vote and of intention to vote, while identifying as an independent was less associated

with voting. This is important, because original NFO research by McCombs and Weaver claimed that independents, persons with weak political party ties, had a stronger NFO because they needed information on who to vote for. This study, however, found a strong, positive association between INFO and voting after holding political party ID constant.

The current study is based on self-report data, and survey respondents will sometimes overreport the extent to which they engage in prosocial behaviors (Hunsley et al., 1996). However, impression-management responses are common in surveys that feature a human interviewer, either in-person or over the phone, and Harris On Demand respondents in the current study completed the survey online and interacted only with a computer. Some impression-management pressures were, therefore, absent. This is particularly important with an outcome variable like being registered to vote measured eight weeks before a U.S. election. The latter is another limitation of the study; as the data were collected prior to the election, the survey did not measure whether respondents voted in the 2020 election. Respondents reported their propensity to vote.

INFO presents future research opportunities. Longitudinal and cross-lagged studies can establish temporal precedence of INFO and voting; that is, future work should examine whether the association between INFO and voting is such that a strong interest in keeping up with news precedes the decision to vote, or, alternately, that voting drives a subsequent motivation to keep up with news.

Panel studies should be conducted examining how, and whether, INFO changes across the lifespan. Prior scholarship has found that young people tend to consume less news than older persons (see Kleemans et al., 2018), and future research can examine whether INFO also increases with age. Panel studies could also assess whether INFO among adolescents and teenagers predicts political participation in young adulthood and in later life stages.

Perhaps most importantly, since INFO was found to be positively associated with being registered to vote and intending to vote, future experimental and quasi-experimental interventions could attempt to strengthen individuals' newsjunkie motivation, which may increase the likelihood that they register to vote and plan to vote in future elections. Some programs already exist that seek to increase news consumption frequency, such as Newspapers In Education (Claes & Quintelier, 2009). Programs like NIE may be more effective if they emphasize news use as a habit and by finding ways to promote news use that contributes to social connections. Again, the components that distinguish the INFO measure from news consumption frequency are the matters of routine, habitual news use, news use as a means of fostering social connections, and the discomfort of falling behind in news consumption.

This study found that INFO was the single strongest predictor of voter conscientiousness. Schoen and Steinbrecher (2013) found that conscientiousness, measured in the tradition of the Big Five personality traits, had a positive effect on attitudes, like civic duty, that contribute positively to voter turnout. Future research can also examine the influence of voter conscientiousness as a variable moderating the relationship between attitudes like civic duty and political participation.

Interestingly, the INFO scale could also provide a measure useful to researchers like Palmer and Toff (2020) and Edgerly (2020) who study news avoidance, as a weak INFO should help identify news avoiders. Or, an *extrinsic* need for orientation scale could include items like, "I consume news because that is what other people expect of me," or "Consuming news feels like work, not like leisure, to me." Note that what distinguishes intrinsic from extrinsic motivation is not a lack of external rewards for intrinsically motivated behaviors. One can have extrinsic rewards from their employer but still be intrinsically interested in performing their work. Individuals perform intrinsically motivated behaviors for themselves, while extrinsically driven behavior is fueled by external obligations.

Other scholarship could examine whether persons with a strong INFO are more knowledgeable about political facts, processes, and actors, when news consumption is held constant, than people with a weak INFO. Other future scholarship could scrutinize the association between INFO and certain political attitudes. For example, while we controlled for interest in politics as it has been

measured in several prior studies (see Peterson et al., 2020), interest in politics has also been assessed in other ways, like research that simply asks respondents how interested they are in politics on a scale from “not at all” to “very much,” and future research on the relationship between INFO and political behavior can control for such measures also.

There may be consequences or traits associated with the newsjunkie characteristic that are not prosocial, such as neuroticism, depressive symptoms, anxiety, increased blood pressure, or other potential downsides. Future work can also examine the relationship between INFO and political polarization and political cynicism, while other work could explore whether newsjunkies have a greater tendency toward motivated reasoning—reasoning one’s way to a “conclusion” they began with (Epley & Gilovich, 2016).

Data examined in the current study are cross-sectional, and while we acquired data from a prior national survey fielding the INFO measure in the U.S. and found INFO scores were not higher eight weeks prior to the 2020 U.S. election than they were in January 2019, we are not yet able to establish temporal precedence—that the correlation between current INFO scores and future political participation is stronger than the correlation between current voting behavior and future INFO scores. Future research can test this.

Still other research topics INFO can enrich are studies of political engagement, civic participation, volunteering, political donations, political and community activism, and participating in political rallies or protests. This study found that newsjunkies are more likely to vote than individuals with a weak INFO, although there are many other behaviors and attitudes worthwhile of study with which INFO may be associated.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

**Appendix S1** Correlation Matrix for INFO Index and News-use variables

**Appendix S2.** Descriptive Statistics of the Dependent and Independent Variables

**Appendix S3.** Individual Associations (Associations between INFO and the three outcome variables are in the main body of the article. *t*-statistics are independent-samples *t*-tests, *F*-statistics are One-Way ANOVAs,  $X^2$  values are chi-squared tests of independence, and *r*’s are Pearson correlations) Between Each Predictor Variable and Voter Registration, Intention to Vote, and Voter Conscientiousness