

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PARTICIPATION OF CAMBODIAN YOUTH

Introduction

Political participation refers to activities which directly or indirectly support or influence policies concerning governance and how it affects people's lives (Milbrath and Goel 1977). In the political literature, political participation is closely linked to political knowledge, or their scope of factual information about politics and government, for example, political institutions and players. Research has argued that people's engagement in political activities is shaped by how politically well-informed they are (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Stithorn 2012). Studies focusing on young people in particular attribute quantity of political participation to levels of political knowledge, namely, that low levels of political knowledge among young voters can lead to a lack of political participation (Niemi and Junn 2005; Milner 2005).

Cambodia has a large young population, with about 65 percent of citizens aged under 30 (UNDP 2020), and around 33 percent (MoEYS 2011) of those aged between 15 and 30, which we call 'youth' in this report. They play a crucial role in the country's politics, and development can progress only when their political participation alongside adults, those aged above 30, is meaningful (Heng et al. 2014). Cambodian youth, however, have long been overlooked and marginalised in politics. But their significant political involvement in the last decade is changing the country's political landscape and thus deserves serious attention from scholars and policy makers. With increased internet access and social media usage, youth become better informed, more vocal, and more engaged in politics. The 2013 elections marked their unprecedented political participation, and since then, youth have been at the center of the government and many non-governmental organisations' agendas (OECD Development Center 2017).

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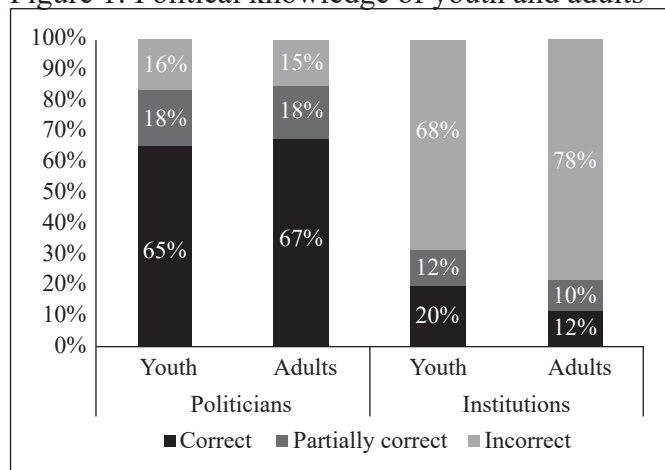
This paper aims to offer an initial investigation of political knowledge among Cambodian youth through comparison to adults, and then explore the relationship between their political knowledge and participation. Results will shed light on how Cambodian youth get involved in politics, as well as what factors affect their political knowledge and participation. A number of relevant policies can be derived based on these findings, and address issues that currently might prevent youth from being well-informed citizens with active political lives.

To achieve the research objectives mentioned above, the paper uses a nationally representative survey conducted by CDRI from October 2017 until January 2018. The stratified-multistage sample consists of 1,600 randomly selected respondents from Phnom Penh and five provinces (Battambang, Kampot, Stung Treng, Svay Rieng, and Kampong Cham). Respondents were 40.2 percent male, 59.8 percent female, 24.9 percent youth, 75.1 percent adult, 26.5 percent urban, and 73.5 percent rural. The questionnaire contained 101 questions that touched upon the respondents' demographics, identity and values, trust and respect, outlook, political participation, and media consumption (Eng et al. 2019).

Political knowledge of Cambodian youth

Bivariate analysis of the quantified primary survey data is used to compare political knowledge between youth and adults. The analysis specifically looks into the mean difference in the knowledge of both age groups, with a Two-Sample T-Test. In the survey, the respondents were asked two questions to test their knowledge of politicians (name at least three national politicians, excluding the prime minister) and their knowledge of institutions (list all the three branches of government). For each question, a correct answer scores 2, a partially correct answer scores 1, and an incorrect answer scores 0. The sum of the two questions is treated as a proxy for the respondents' political knowledge, with a higher total score being interpreted as better political knowledge, as shown in Table 1 (see Appendix 1) and visualised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Political knowledge of youth and adults

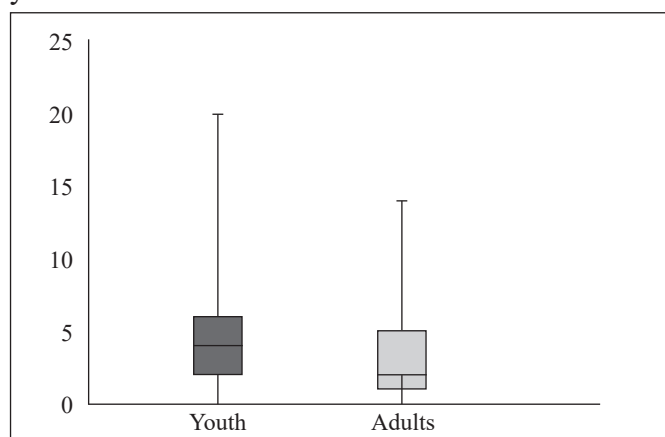


Note: Number of observations = 1,600

The results show that there is no significant mean difference in respondents' knowledge of politicians, but there is with their knowledge of institutions. On average, youth tend to have better political knowledge than adults. Although this finding for youth sounds satisfying, there is still room for improvement regarding their political knowledge, as only 65 percent and 20 percent of youth provided correct answers to the two political knowledge questions on politicians and institutions, respectively.

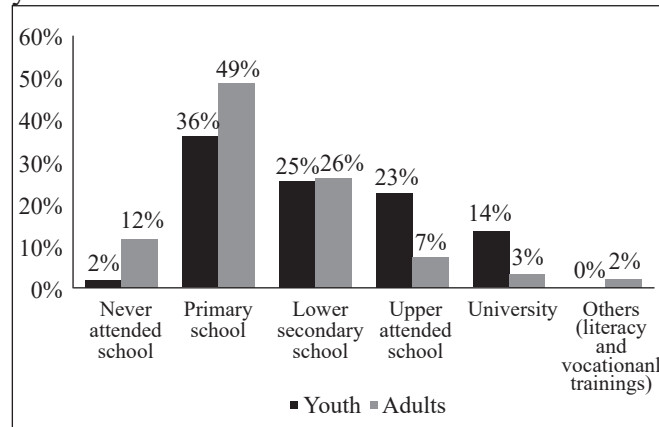
To understand what lies behind such political knowledge disparity between youth and adults, political knowledge is further regressed on a number of factors which in previous studies have been found to be its significant predictors, such as age (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), gender (Mondak and Anderson 2004), location (Pereira 2011), income (Lind 2011), education (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Junn 2005), and media

Figure 3: Media consumption disparity between youth and adults



Note: Number of observations = 1,600

Figure 2: Education (completed) disparity between youth and adults



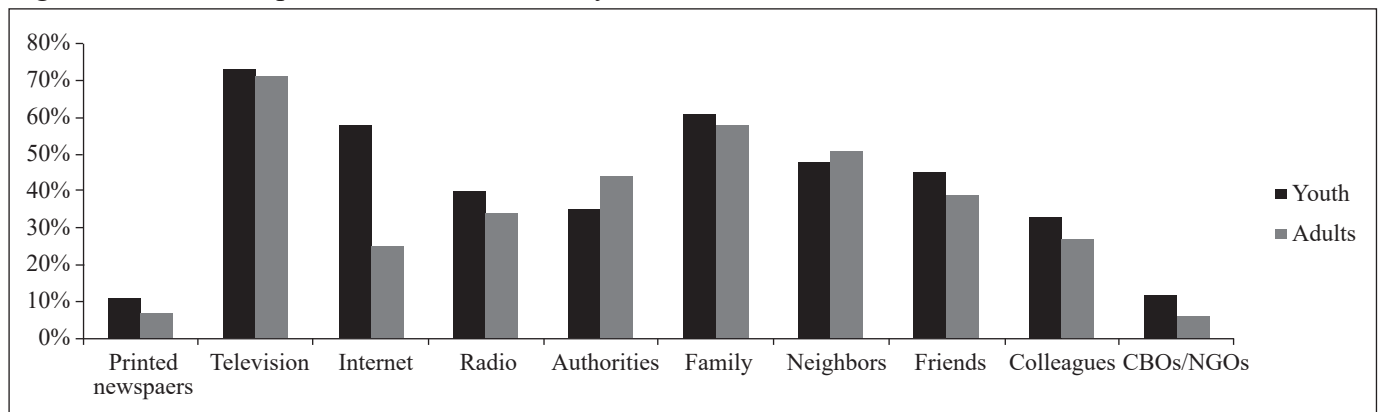
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consumption (Pasek et al. 2006). Age ranges from 16 to 30. Gender takes a value of 1 for female and 0 for male. Location is coded 1 for urban and 0 for rural. Income varies from 0 to 1,200 in 10 thousand Cambodian riel, and its inverse hyperbolic sine is used for this study to lower its variance. Education takes a value of 0 for primary school or lower, 1 for high school, and 2 for university. Media consumption is the total number of hours that each person spends on reading printed newspapers, watching TV, and using the internet in a typical day. The paper employs Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) to conduct the regression, and results are reported in Table 2 (see Appendix 2).

Similar to those aforementioned previous studies, the results show that political knowledge has a strong significant positive relationship with education and media consumption. These results help explain the difference in political knowledge between youth and adults discussed earlier, such that youth tend to have better political knowledge because they tend to pursue higher education (see Figure 2) and use more media (see Figure 3)¹. Education is a means to expose people to, stimulate their interest in, and improve their cognitive ability to learn about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In addition, both youth and adults reported that media is their most important source of political information besides close circles of people, the authorities, and other organisations, with internet

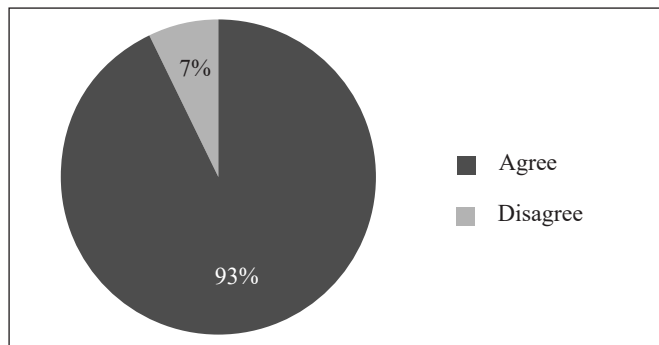
¹ The infamous Pol Pot genocide and the civil war have disrupted education in Cambodia (IIEP-UNESCO 2011). With the continued rise of technology and media, it is understandable that youth, as a new generation, tend to have better education and higher media usage.

Figure 4: Sources of political information for youth and adults



Note: Number of observations = 1,600

Figure 5: Youth views on importance of having independent political opinions



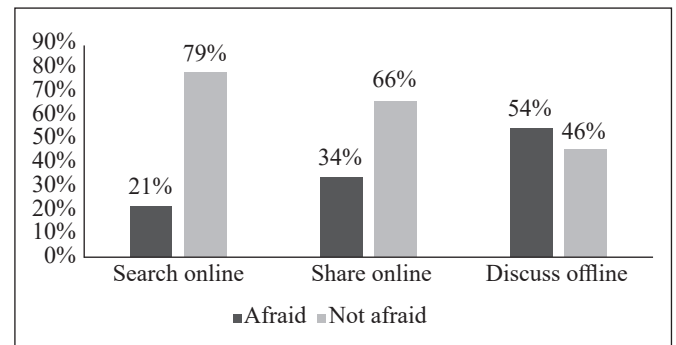
Note: Number of observations = 398

appearing to be more popular among youth (see Figure 4). Spending more time consuming media increases the tendency of exposure to a variety of political content and therefore obtaining political knowledge.

Many responding youth, however, reported feeling limitations on their online and offline political freedom which can potentially hinder their acquisition of political knowledge. While 93 percent of youth responded that it is important to have their own political opinions, 21 percent expressed fear towards searching political news online, 34 percent towards sharing political views online, and 54 percent towards discussing political views offline (see Figure 5 and 6).

In Cambodia, the political system remains restricted. Political discussion and meetings are forbidden in schools (Yong 2005), and there have also been documented cases of violent oppression and crackdowns on peaceful protests and demonstrations (Henke 2011; Department of State 2012; COMFREL 2013; LICADHO 2014). Even though the widespread use of the internet now has made social media an effective tool for political

Figure 6: Youth perceived online and offline political freedom



Note: Number of observations = 398

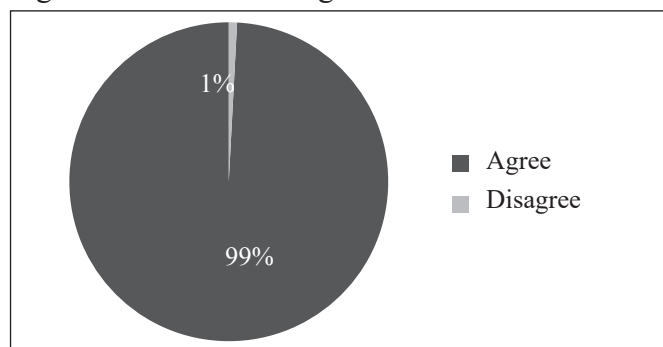
news updates, dialogue and mobilisation, users are often threatened with legal charges over claims of abusing their freedom of expression (Sok 2015; Sun 2019). All of these induce and perpetuate fear among youth, distancing them from politics (Heng et al. 2014).

Political participation of Cambodian youth

Youth in Cambodia actively engage in voting in national elections, but significantly less so concerning local level governance, specifically engagement in the commune-level development planning process². Ninety-nine percent of young respondents acknowledged that they see voting as more than just a civil right, but rather they feel obliged to vote (see Figure 7). Among eligible youth voters, 49 percent voted in the 2013 national election, 71 percent in the 2017 commune election, and up to 93 percent planned to vote in the contentious 2018 national election (which saw

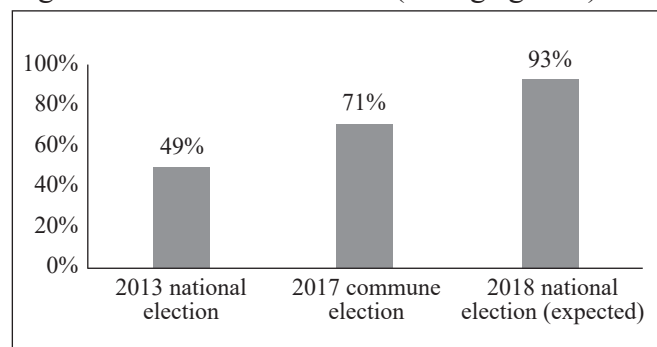
² For further reading on commune development planning process, read “Decentralization” by CDC-CRDB and “Guideline on C/S Development Plan and C/S Investment Program” by Inter-ministerial Working Group.

Figure 7: Youth felt obligation to vote



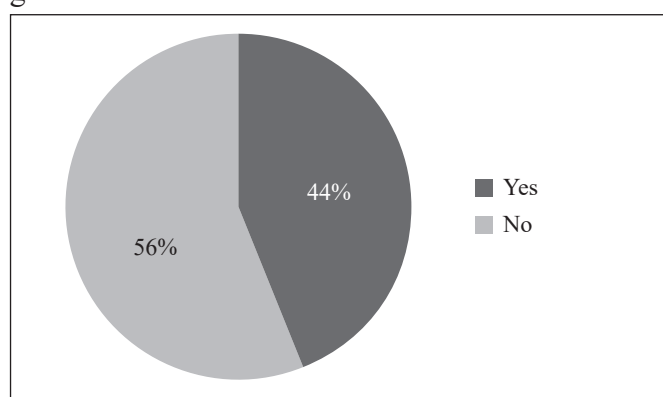
Note: Number of observations = 398

Figure 8: Youth voter turnout (voting age: 18)



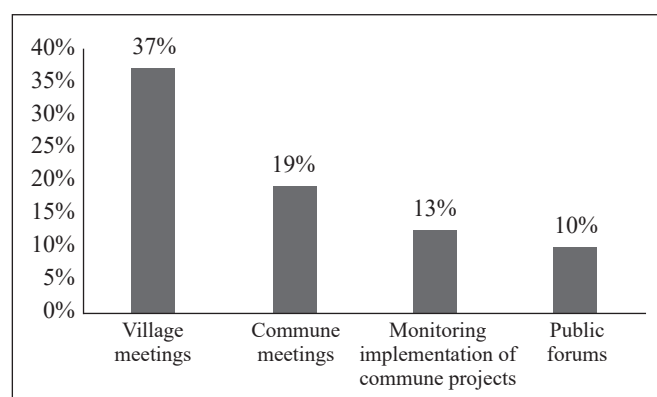
Note: Number of eligible youth voters = 352 out of 398

Figure 9: Youth participation in local level governance



Note: Number of observations = 398

Figure 10: Consultative meetings at village and commune level



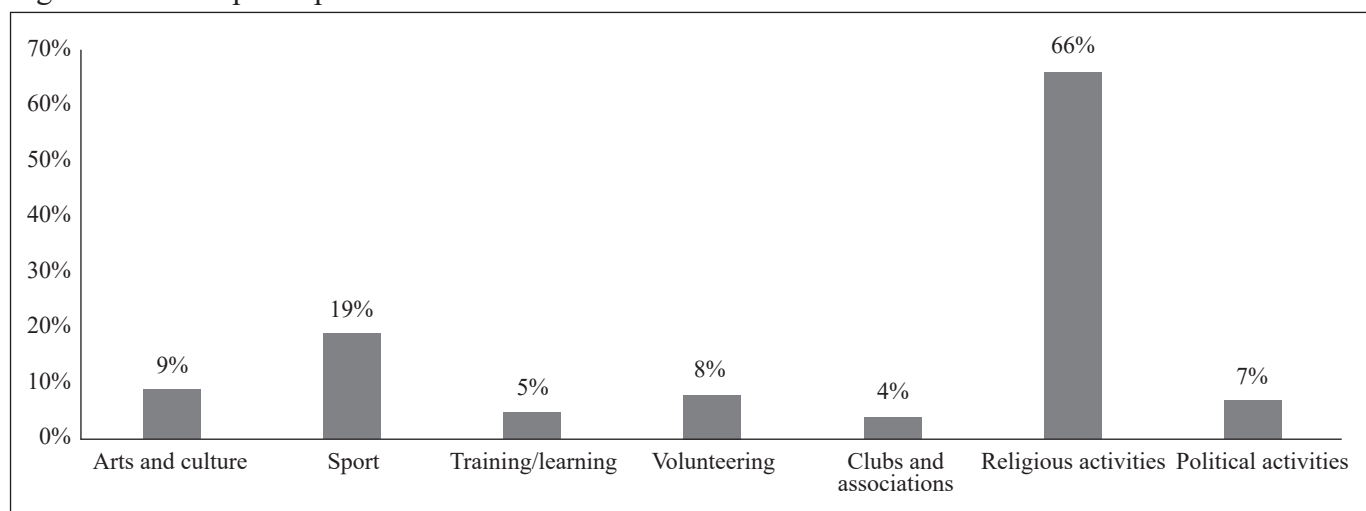
Note: Number of observations = 398

the main opposition party banned) (see Figure 8). Regarding participation in local level governance, 44 percent of youth had been involved in some kinds of consultative meetings at village and commune level (see Figure 9). In particular, 37 percent had been involved in village meetings, 19 percent in commune meetings, 13 percent in monitoring implementation of commune projects, and 10

percent in public forums (see Figure 10). Figure 11 illustrates that youth participation in political activities is generally infrequent. Only 7 percent of youth reported to have participated in political activities in the last month.

Multivariate regression models of youth voting in elections and their participation in local level governance are used in order to explain the

Figure 11: Youth participation in the last month



Note: Number of observations = 398

relationship between their political knowledge and participation. All patterns of youth voting and participation at village and commune level are the dependent variables, and each one is studied separately. The variables are measured by their answers to the corresponding questions in the survey, taking a value of 1 for participation and 0 for no participation. The models include political knowledge as the main independent variable and control for age, gender, location, income, education, and media consumption as suggested by previous literature as possibly exerting some effects on individual political participation (Stithorn 2012; Adegbola and Gearhart 2019). Because all the dependent variables are binary variables, the paper employs logistic regression method to estimate all the models, as shown in Table 3 (see Appendix 3).

The results show that political knowledge has significant positive coefficients for all the patterns of political participation, except for voting in the national elections and monitoring implementation of commune projects. That means youth with higher political knowledge are more likely to vote in the commune election and participate in those consultative meetings at village and commune level other than monitoring implementation of commune projects; simply, more politically informed youth tend to participate more in politics. However, the causal relationship between political knowledge and participation is not clear-cut. The causality can go both directions, as more political knowledge can encourage youth to participate more in politics, but they can also acquire more of the knowledge in the process of their political participation. Despite such complexity in determining the causal relationship between youth political knowledge and participation, a basic knowledge of politics is required for them to participate meaningfully in Cambodia's political space (Milner 2002).

Conclusion

From the bivariate and multivariate analysis, this paper finds that Cambodian youth tend to be better informed about politics compared to adults. Their greater political knowledge is related to their higher education and media consumption through which they can acquire a large variety of political facts. Such results serve as an encouraging sign for political development in the country. Youth, when grouped together as a major political demographic,

are interested and consciously participative in politics, as we found that the more political knowledge they have, the more likely they are to participate in politics. Nevertheless, a substantial number of youth still lack political knowledge, which along with their political participation can be considerably constrained by their perception of limited political freedom. The Cambodian government and relevant civil society organisations should therefore collaborate side by side to build a favourable political environment where youth can feel empowered instead of fearful in seeking political information and meaningfully participating in politics.

The paper faces some limitations that future studies need to address. Political knowledge is a broad concept that captures various kinds of factual political information, but the political knowledge indicator used in this analysis is based on just two political knowledge questions. That is why the proxy may not accurately measure their overall political knowledge. The survey data are also not current, dating back to late 2017 and early 2018. As socio-economic changes have continued to develop since then, as well as the political and media space alongside, this may have somehow altered the current political attitudes and actions of Cambodian youth in 2020.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 1: Political knowledge disparity between youth and adults

Variable	Youth	Adults	Absolute difference
Political knowledge			
Politicians	1.49	1.5241	0.0342
	(0.0381)	(0.0214)	(0.0437)
Institutions	0.5151	0.3353	0.1798***
	(0.0404)	(0.0196)	(0.0448)
Total	2.005	1.8594	0.1456**
	(0.0623)	(0.0328)	(0.0705)

Note: Number of observations = 1,600

Standard errors are reported in brackets.

*** denotes P-value < 0.01, ** denotes P-value < 0.05.

Appendix 2

Table 2: OLS regression results on factors affecting political knowledge

Variable	Coefficient
Age	0.0038**
	(0.0019)
Gender/Female	-0.4898***
	(0.0552)
Location/Urban	0.1154*
	(0.0614)
Income	0.0106
	(0.0124)
Education	0.6888***
	(0.0502)
Media consumption	0.0487***
	(0.01)

Note: Number of observations = 1,594

Missing observations are due to incomplete information.

Robust standard errors are reported in brackets.

*** denotes P-value < 0.01, ** denotes P-value < 0.05, * denotes P-value < 0.1.

Appendix 3

Table 3: Logistic regression results on relationship between youth political knowledge and participation

Variable	Voting in election			Participation at village and commune level			
	2013 national	2017 commune	2018 national (expected)	Village meetings	Commune meetings	Monitoring implementation of commune projects	Public forums
Political knowledge	0.2052	0.2087**	0.1917	0.2913***	0.2792**	0.0155	0.2896*
	(0.1555)	(0.1065)	(0.148)	(0.107)	(0.116)	(0.1351)	(0.1801)
Age	0.485***	0.2633***	0.2464***	0.1456***	0.0926***	0.0388	0.1154**
	(0.0457)	(0.0327)	(0.0495)	(0.0285)	(0.0328)	(0.0411)	(0.0487)
Gender/Female	0.4054	0.3297	-0.0398	-0.1138	-0.0143	-0.2931	-0.0431
	(0.3158)	(0.2616)	(0.3493)	(0.2416)	(0.2786)	(0.3073)	(0.3403)
Location/Urban	0.3933	0.0358	-0.0357	-0.6127*	-0.1156	-0.1293	-0.3662
	(0.4171)	(0.3286)	(0.4716)	(0.321)	(0.3734)	(0.4544)	(0.4731)
Income	0.1058*	0.1012*	0.0949	-0.1039*	0.048	0.0341	0.0087
	(0.0662)	(0.0586)	(0.0673)	(0.0572)	(0.0706)	(0.0728)	(0.0867)
Education	0.5178*	0.6667***	0.0658	-0.7142***	-0.3942*	-0.166	-0.1438
	(0.275)	(0.232)	(0.3318)	(0.2206)	(0.2675)	(0.3203)	(0.3372)
Media consumption	-0.01	-0.0015	0.0796	0.0044	-0.0063	-0.0456	0.0596
	(0.0537)	(0.0455)	(0.071)	(0.0398)	(0.0467)	(0.0586)	(0.057)
N	398	398	398	398	398	398	398
Pseudo R-squared	0.4386	0.2434	0.1809	0.1116	0.0474	0.0167	0.0477
Wald Chi-square	129.82	98.38	31.09	49.87	19.83	6.08	9.8
P-value	0.0000	0.0000	0.0001	0.0000	0.0059	0.5308	0.1999

Note: N denotes number of observations.

Robust standard errors are reported in brackets.

*** denotes P-value < 0.01, ** denotes P-value < 0.05, * denotes P-value < 0.1.