Political information consumption and electoral turnout during COVID: the case of the 2020 municipal elections

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Abstract
The effects on political participation of the consumption of political information from traditional and digital media are widely addressed in the literature. However, what happens in times of pandemic when people have other pressing concerns that are likely to receive significant media coverage? Does the consumption of political information—which increases in times of pandemic—mobilize or rather demobilize voters in local elections? By focusing on the two rounds of the French municipal elections in March and June 2020, we explore how the pandemic affected turnout through the consumption of political information distributed by official news media and users on social media during the first peak of the crisis (March 2020) and during the first period of decline in contagion rates (June 2020). Our results show that the association between consumption of political information and participation is detectable but remains less relevant than traditional predictors of turnout such as socio-demographic variables or an interest in politics. Moreover, we show that the strength of the effect of consumption of political information varies according to both the type of election and the type of political information consumption (local or national news, online or offline). Overall, it seems that the pandemic context had little effect on the relations between political information consumption and electoral participation.

Keywords Media consumption · Political information · Elections · Local politics · Turnout · France · Pandemic · COVID-19
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly affected the functioning of democracies. While some countries postponed their elections during the health crisis, others held them. France was one of the latter and decided to hold municipal elections during the first wave of the pandemic.

Hence, the first round of the French municipal elections was maintained on March 15 despite the announcement of strict confinement measures a few days earlier. Only 44.7% of registered voters went to the polls compared to 63.6% in 2014. In the days that followed, the government announced a general lockdown and postponed the second round of the elections, which only took place in late June. Turnout then only reached 41.6% while the average turnout rate in the second round in 2014 was 62.1%. This decline in participation rates can partly be explained by the health context (Brouard and McAvay 2020; Guerra 2021). Nevertheless, this drop in turnout in 2020, although impressive, is also part of a continuous decline in turnout in local elections in France starting in 1989 (Jaffré 2020).

This unprecedented event offers an interesting quasi-experimental setting for measuring the impact of an external shock such as the global public health crisis and its political communication challenges on voting behaviour. Recent and preliminary studies have started using this opportunity and have shown that the pandemic caused either a rally round-the-flag effect, with massive electoral support for incumbents, or massive abstention (Brouard and McAvay 2020; Haute et al. 2021).

However, these early studies do not address the impact of political information consumption on voter turnout during the crisis. And yet, the usual ways in which citizens informed themselves changed significantly during this period (Smyrnaios 2020; Casero-Ripollés 2020), thus deeply affecting the ways in which citizens made up their mind about voting in the upcoming elections. Therefore, this paper studies both the change in media consumption of political information by voters and its association with turnout, by focusing on a case study, the 2020 municipal elections in France. We explore how the pandemic affected turnout through political information consumption before and after the first peak of the crisis by studying the two rounds of municipal elections and by comparing them with the 2017 presidential election. In order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the electoral impact of political information consumption in times of crisis, we assess citizens’ use of both traditional media (TV, radio, written press), at the local or national level, and digital and social media (online political discussions over Twitter, Facebook, etc.).

Within this context, the research question explored in this study is the following: to what extent is political information consumption associated with voter turnout during the municipal elections in France in the special context of the 2020 health crisis?

In the next section, we outline the theoretical underpinnings of our study and present our hypotheses. In Sect. 3, we present our methodology and we outline our

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1 For simplicity’s sake, we use the general terms “political information consumption” as a shorter synonym of “consumption of political information in the traditional and digital media” throughout the paper.
analyses and results in Sect. 4. Section 5 discusses the empirical and theoretical implications of our findings.

**Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

In this section, we first present the existing literature on the interplay between online and offline consumption of political information and political participation, before looking at how external shocks may (or may not) alter this relationship. Finally, we discuss some specific features of local elections that may influence this relationship.

**Online and offline political information consumption and political participation**

Exploring the patterns of news media consumption by individuals and their impact on their electoral participation are central questions in the current academic literature (Min et al. 2020). However, this debate takes on a new dimension in the context of the COVID health crisis.

It has long been established that traditional and digital mass media are one of citizens’ primary sources of information, especially on political matters (Chaffee and Frank 1996). Moreover, a number of studies have assessed the link between political knowledge and civic and political participation (Verba et al. 1995). A priori, the more citizens are informed, the more they tend to mobilize and participate politically, especially in terms of electoral turnout.

In contrast to the literature mentioned above, other studies have argued that the relationship between news media consumption, and particularly consumption of political information, and increased political participation at the individual level is less straightforward than one might think (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). On the one hand, an increase in political knowledge is likely to boost interest in politics and therefore stimulate participation in political processes (Gaxie 1978). On the other hand, higher levels of news media consumption, and particularly consumption of political information, could also lead to greater political cynicism in citizens, and therefore to weaker political activism (Pinkleton et al. 2012). Thus, more intense news media consumption is associated with higher levels of political apathy among citizens, more political alienation, and a gradual withdrawal from political processes.

The literature remains divided on this point: the proponents of the “malaise” hypothesis contradict the supporters of the “mobilization” hypothesis. For the former, news media consumption increases citizens’ cynicism and therefore leads to their gradual withdrawal from the political arena. For the latter, on the contrary, news media consumption—by enhancing citizens’ political knowledge—heightens their political interest and participation. On the one hand, several early studies in political communication and sociology, particularly in the USA, have pointed out the negative effects of mass media on the political attitude of citizens. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, seminal research has shown that news media consumption,
and television in particular, is linked to an increase in the political malaise of individuals (Robinson 1976).

On the other hand, other work demonstrates the positive impact of the consumption of political information in the form of news media on civic engagement and political participation. For instance, interest in politics has increased in many countries thanks to the educational role of the mass media (Dalton 1996). The widespread availability of television has had an extremely positive impact from this point of view (Norris, 1996, 2000). This effect is confirmed in various recent studies (Drew and Weaver 2006). De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) argued that the positive effects of exposure to news media outweigh its negative ones on political interest and participation. In other words, the effects of news media consumption, and particularly consumption of political information, on political knowledge, interest and participation would be more virtuous than vicious. Studies at the local level also validate the hypothesis of a positive link between news media exposure (at the local level) and increased political participation (Min et al. 2020).

Newton (1999) complicated this debate by arguing that, more than just news media consumption, it is the type of media content consumed that is relevant. There are important differences between the various types of mass media, especially between print and television, but also between traditional and digital media. However, the importance of these differences is often underestimated in the scholarly debate—as different media serve different citizens’ needs (Chaffee and Kanihan 1997).

With the advent of digital technology and the internet, a new question has been added to this already complex debate: is the internet simply the online migration of traditional news media (Margolis and Resnick, 2000) or does it provide an opportunity for citizens to learn more and different political information than that provided by traditional news media?

The consumption of political information online has sharply increased (Pew research centre 2016), even if other media, especially at the local level, remain important (Owen 2011). While early research on the effects of online political information consumption on levels of political knowledge has produced mixed results (Drew and Weaver 2006), more recent studies seem more optimistic (Hendricks and Schill 2014). Shehata and Strombäck (2021), for example, show how using online news websites generates positive learning effects. Nonetheless, their results suggest that using social media to follow news about politics and current affairs does not compensate for not using traditional news media in terms of acquired political knowledge (Shehata and Strombäck 2021). Other authors report significant political learning via the internet, even after controlling specifically for individual consumption of political information in the print media and on television (Norris and Sanders 2003).

The study of the relationships between online political information consumption and political attitudes, and between online political information consumption and political participation, also provides useful theoretical foundations for our analytical framework, in particular for the case of the consumption of political information (Kenski and Stroud 2006). Some studies have shown a positive (albeit sometimes weak in terms of statistical significance) association between online media exposure
and an increase in the level of individuals’ electoral and extra-electoral political participation (Boulianne 2015), including among first-time voters (Ohme 2019). This link also seems stronger if individuals are already predisposed to engage politically (Park and Perry 2008). Other studies further refine this analysis, claiming that the use of some forms of digital media, such as political party websites and social media, has appreciable effects on political participation (Dimitrova et al. 2014). For his part, Prior (2007) shows how, by allowing citizens to choose the media contents most consistent with their preferences, cable television and the internet have inadvertently increased the inequality in knowledge and turnout.

Overall, these studies seem to demonstrate a positive impact of political information consumption—both online and offline—on political participation. The question is therefore whether this effect is maintained in the event of a health crisis, when news consumers become better informed about both the health risks of visiting a polling station and the measures taken by public authorities to combat the epidemic—measures which might be opposed by (some) citizens and thus lead them to abstain.

Online and offline political information consumption and political participation in times of crisis

The association between political information consumption and political behaviour is often challenged in times of crisis and following external shocks (Kaun 2016). One of the questions that emerges here is whether the media coverage of the handling of the health crisis in 2020 reinforced the association between political information consumption and political apathy. Did exposure to political information on mass media during the 2020 health crisis lead to stronger political mobilization at the individual level? Alternatively, did it lead to an increase in citizens’ malaise and dissatisfaction with political institutions and consequently is it negatively associated with their likelihood of participating in elections?

The overarching theoretical issue raised by the COVID-19 context is whether we should expect (different types of) crises to have any sort of effect on turnout. Previous studies on voting behaviour in times of crisis focused, for instance, on the increased cost of voting during an external shock (since going to the polls under a pandemic is likely to be seen as more risky, uncertain, or more complicated) to explain the decreased turnout (Blais 2000). Only a few studies to date have explored the impact on elections of the current health crisis. Exploring the hypotheses formulated by Blais (2000) in the case of the Malawi presidential election held on 23 June 2020, Chirwa et al. (2022) show that voter turnout was highly affected by the perceived risk of catching COVID-19. Fernandez-Navia et al. (2021) demonstrate the same phenomenon in the case of the regional elections held in Spain on 12 July 2020. Regarding the consequences of COVID-19 on the US presidential election, Bisbee and Honig (2020) show that voters prefer “safe” candidates in times of social anxiety. Others question the impact of COVID-19 on Trump’s defeat (Lake and Nie 2021; Warshaw et al. 2020) without providing a definitive and clear answer.
In the case of France, recent studies such as Brouard and McAvay (2020), Giommoni and Loumeau (2020), and Noury et al. (2021) have shown that the more a department was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the more abstention increased compared to the 2014 elections (based on several different public health indicators that were used as a proxy for the perceived risk). Dolez’s (2020) analysis of the results of the second round yielded quite paradoxical findings: even after the pandemic’s external shock and in an extraordinary electoral context, the results of municipal elections seemed to follow the traditional logic of second order by-elections, with voters supporting mostly opposition parties and sanctioning the candidates of the national incumbent party.

What is missing from these studies of the decline in electoral participation is the dimension of political communication and media consumption of political information. These predictors are, however, crucial for understanding individual political behaviour during crises such as the 2020 pandemic because of the proven increase in media use and of the changes in the patterns of political communication during crises (Parasie and Cointet 2012; Lilleker et al. 2021). Social psychology studies have shown, for instance, the negative implications for individuals of TV news watching during a mass trauma such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Solomon et al. 2021).

In the USA, for example, recent studies have shown that Republican voters have a lower perception of the pandemic risk than other voters do (Barrios and Hochberg 2020; Gadarian et al. 2021). This is partly due to the type of news media they consume and to the specific brand of information about the virus and its dangers that these media circulate (Chock and Kim 2020; Stecula and Pickup 2021). Consequently, could lower levels of fear of the virus—which are mediated by the type of news media consumed—result in different levels of mobilization of different sections of the electorate, thus affecting the election outcome?

The few studies already carried out on the individuals’ news media consumption during the crisis (Casero-Ripollès 2020) show that, although lockdown did not revolutionize the media (and digital) environment in France, it nevertheless contributed to accelerating its transformation (Smyrnaios 2020). These authors note, for example, an increase in the consumption of local news media during the lockdown and that Facebook has become even more central in online exposure to political information. Moreover, the differences in news media consumption between socio-economic strata seem to have narrowed during the crisis (Casero-Ripollès 2020). The aforementioned scholarly works allow us to theorize how the shock of the pandemic can change citizens’ motivations to turn out to vote.

However, the question of whether this pattern is associated with the level of electoral participation remains open, especially in the case of the 2020 municipal elections. Moreover, are there any differences in the association between political information consumption and electoral participation in the 2020 local ballot and the 2017 presidential election, the most recent pre-crisis ballot?
The consequences of the local nature of the election in the 2020 municipal elections

The French municipal elections of 2020 constitute an original case study due to their local character. Indeed, the literature shows that the media coverage differs according to the different types of elections (Strömbäck and Nord 2008), and between local and national elections in particular (Esser and Strömbäck 2012). It seems, for example, that local ballots, with the exception of those in main cities, receive little coverage in the mainstream media. However, the literature suggests that consumption of local news media does indeed affect participation levels (Min et al. 2020), both in terms of electoral turnout and of extra-electoral participation more generally. Consequently, the study of one municipal election, for which the type of media coverage differs substantially from the media coverage of the (more often explored) presidential and general elections, will shed a new and relevant light on the relationship between voting and media consumption.

It should also be stressed that, in addition to being a local election, the two rounds of the municipal ballot were held at two very particular moments of the health crisis. Indeed, the first round was maintained at its initial date, on 15 March 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis in France. The first general lockdown would start a day later, on 17 March. Thus, one can argue that the (political) information consumed by citizens before the first round of the elections is less marked (at least during the first part of the campaign) by the health crisis compared to their consumption between the two rounds—notably with regard to the extent of the crisis but also the evaluation and acceptance of the countermeasures taken by the authorities. Due to the crisis, the second round was delayed from 22 March to 28 June 2020, i.e. after the first peak of the crisis—and after the general national lockdown ended on 11 May 2020.

In order to control for the exceptionality of the socio-political context of the observed ballot, and as we do not have access to panel data, we compare our results with those obtained during the most recent presidential election (2017). Based on this case study and the aforementioned literature highlighting the links between political information consumption and electoral participation, we formulate three hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis focuses on turnout in the first round of the 2020 municipal elections, at the beginning of the crisis. We hypothesize that since the crisis only started at the very end of the campaign, the links between political information consumption and participation remain the same as those traditionally observed. Our first hypothesis is therefore the following:

H1 The more people consume political information on both online and offline media—especially local news media—the more they are likely to vote in the first round of municipal elections.

Our second hypothesis focuses on participation in the second round of the election, when France was emerging from its initial lockdown and the crisis had become
global. Here again, we develop our hypothesis from the literature, showing that political information consumption positively affects participation. The consumption of political information is associated with high levels of interest in politics—both at the local and national level—and this interest remains stronger among consumers of political news despite the potentially demobilizing effect of the crisis. Furthermore, as political information consumption is a habit, we assume that its association with participation does not change substantially (or only very slowly) due to an external shock. Thus, our second hypothesis is the following:

**H2** The more people consume political information on both online and offline media—especially local news media—during the peak of the pandemic, the more they are likely to vote in the second round of the municipal elections.

In other words, hypothesis 2 assumes that even during the health crisis, the more individuals consume political information—especially local news media—the more they tend to vote in municipal elections.

Our third hypothesis aims at testing the relationship between the consumption of political information in the media and past levels of electoral participation, in particular with regard to the previous round of elections:

**H3** The more citizens consume political information in the media—especially national media—the more they are likely to have voted in the 2017 presidential election.

**Methodology**

This article uses individual-level data collected on a specific case study, namely the metropolitan area of Lille, which is composed of 95 different municipalities and which represents as such the fourth largest city in France (1,146,320 inhabitants in 2017). The case study is selected because of its socio-demographic characteristics: the metropolitan area is mostly urban, with high population density, and is structured by strong social inequalities that traditionally affect political dynamics, especially at the electoral level (Rivière et al. 2014). It also has local media, such as *La Voix du Nord*, with a strong base and good circulation (Parasie and Cointet 2012).

In addition, in the main municipalities of the Lille metropolitan area, the 2020 election campaign was the focus of a particularly high level of media coverage. The local ballot was also extremely competitive and polarized in this case study, in a context in which municipal elections are usually considered to be “second order” ballots in France (Reif and Schmitt 1980). For instance, in Lille, a socialist stronghold—which has been governed by socialists since 1896 (with only two phases of alternation in government, namely between 1904 and 1919 and between 1947 and 1955)—the incumbent socialist mayor, Martine Aubry, largely weakened by the defeat of her party in the previous departmental and regional elections and by the loss of several Lille constituencies, managed to be re-elected by only 227 votes in
the second round against the Ecologists/Greens (Haute and Lefebvre 2022). In Tourcoing, the Minister of the Interior and incumbent mayor, Gérald Darmanin, was largely re-elected. Finally, in Roubaix, a former socialist stronghold conquered by the right in 2014, the campaign was marked by the division of the left, which failed to retake the city (Bretton-Wilk et al. 2021).

The “PELMEL” survey (“Participation Électorale dans la MEtropole Lilloise”—Electoral participation in the Lille metropolitan area) was carried out online from 29 June to 19 July 2020 by two research centres (ESPOL and CERAPS) and a polling institute, Dynata France, based on a sample of 863 respondents, representative of the population of the Lille metropolitan area aged 18 and over. The sample was selected according to age and gender population quotas, and we used the “icarus” R package (Rebecq 2019) to compute post-stratification weights in order to match the marginal distribution of the sample to known population margins, using levels of educational attainment and vote choices in the first round of the 2017 presidential election.²

We considered only respondents who had the right to vote (holding French nationality or the nationality of one of the EU member states, being 18 years old or over at the time of the election and being registered to vote). Among the respondents, 699 could vote in the first round of the 2020 municipal elections and 513 could vote in the second round. These figures suggest caution about the potential generalization of the conclusions of this study, especially since we used samples drawn from non-probability methods such as quota sampling, which could increase the risk of bias regarding political behaviours (Selb and Munzert 2013).

For instance, the respondents who did not vote in the 2020 municipal elections are under-represented in our sample with regard to the results of the elections in the Lille metropolitan area. 62.5% of the respondents voted in the first round against 34.2% of the registered voters of the Lille metropolitan area. Also, 61% of the respondents who could vote in a second round did so against 32.1% of the registered voters of the Lille metropolitan area. These observations, which persist even after weighting the data based on the educational attainment and the vote choices of the respondents in the 2017 presidential elections, are explained by the fact that the respondents to this type of survey are often more interested in politics than the average voter. Indeed, answering a political survey could be considered to be a form of political participation (Braconnier and Dormagen 2019). We are thus aware of the issues of social desirability that generally lead to an inflation of reported electoral participation in survey data.

While abstention is only slightly underestimated in national post-election surveys conducted during presidential elections (e.g. −4.6 points in the 2017 FES) (Gougou and Sauger 2017), this is much more the case in surveys conducted after other types of elections. For example, in the post-election survey conducted by telephone following the 2015 regional elections, 71.8 per cent of respondents reported having cast their ballot when actual turnout was 50 per cent (Gougou 2017: 51). The same is true in official government surveys based on turnout data during legislative

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² Integrating additional variables, such as voting in the first round of 2020 municipal elections, would have led to an excessive weights dispersion.
elections (Haute, 2022). As Gougou points out, this underestimation problem is limited by the fact that our reasoning here focuses on the structures and features of participation and not on its levels (Gougou 2017: 51).

In addition, given that the data come from a single cross-sectional survey, we are aware of the limitations of relying on recalled behaviour to measure participation in 2017. The implications of such limitations on the analyses have led us to be very cautious when discussing the potential for generalization of our results.

Moreover, if our survey data allow us to explore the association between the use of (online and offline) media to follow political news and electoral turnout, we are aware that our indicators of political information consumption could be considered as a poorly reliable measure according to many authors who criticize the use of self-reports of media exposure (Price and Zaller 1993; Prior 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Goldman and Warren 2020).

In fact, the measure of our key individual-level variable (political information consumption) is based on self-reported data. We are aware that respondents may have trouble reporting their own consumption of political information. This is all the more true if the measure, as in the PELMEL survey, concerns political information consumption during the crisis (i.e. just before the survey) as well as before the crisis (i.e. four months earlier), which can also be affected by recall bias. Furthermore, respondents also tend to over-report political information consumption. Indeed, the problems with the representativeness of our sample for electoral turnout may also affect political information. That said, even if self-reported measures of political information consumption might be biased, we opted for this specific research design because we are interested in assessing individual perceptions and their impact on behaviour.

Finally, we could not distinguish in our survey between different types of local or national media (because the media environment is increasingly fragmented and polarized (Dilliplane et al. 2013)). For instance, it is not possible in our survey to distinguish between voters who watch news channels (e.g. Cnews/BFMTV) and traditional mainstream channels. Yet, even if they are very fragile, the different measures used seem overall to capture French citizens’ true interest in regularly consuming political information. These indicators appear to be strongly correlated with an interest in politics at the local level (for local media) or at the national one (for national media and online political discussions) (see Table 3 in Appendix). However, the association is weaker for political information consumption during the lockdown. At any rate, by showing that political information consumption correlates with other related constructs (e.g. political interest), we tentatively provide a face validity measure of our key individual-level variable.

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3 See Table 1 for the list of questionnaire items used.

4 Subjective measures of media consumption, related to how people perceive it and to people’s impression of being informed about politics, provide adequate external validity if the aim of the study is to assess how people’s perceptions of media consumption shape their political attitudes and behaviours (Lee et al. 2022).
| Frequency of consumption of national news media for political information | 67.83 | 15.42 | 16.75 |
| Frequency of consumption of local news media for political information | 43.51 | 20.05 | 36.44 |
| Frequency of consumption of national news media for political information during lockdown | 61.33 | 17.82 | 20.85 |
| Frequency of consumption of local news media for political information during lockdown | 24.92 | 17.89 | 57.19 |
| Frequency of participation in online political discussions (Facebook, Twitter, Websites) | 26.25 | 73.75 | |
| Frequency of participation in online political discussions during lockdown | 18.85 | 81.15 | |

*Table 1* Descriptive statistics of individual political information consumption (%)

*Source:* PELMEL survey 2020; Field: voters registered for the first round of the 2020 elections (N=699 respondents)
Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics concerning the political information consumption of the individuals in the sample. Three elements on patterns of political information consumption in France emerge from this table. First, most of our respondents consume national news media for their political information on a daily basis, but this pattern of consumption did not increase during lockdown although the consumption of media in general was more important (Smyrnaios, 2020). Second, the consumption of local media for political information is less regular, and was even less so during lockdown, although these are the media that cover municipal elections the most (Bousquet 2018).

Overall, our data do not show a higher level of political information consumption during lockdown. Although this seems surprising, given that other studies reported the objective increase in media consumption during lockdown in France, we need to stress that our study focuses on political information consumption and not on media consumption in general, and that other items in our survey support this finding. In fact, we can look at another indicator (not reported in Table 1): an item asking respondents about their perception of how their consumption of online content related to national and local politics changed during the lockdown. Our survey data indicate that only 16.8% of respondents reported having accessed more online content covering national politics and only 10.8% regarding local politics during lockdown.

Third, only a minority of respondents regularly participate in online political discussions on social media (Facebook Twitter, etc.), and the frequency of this behaviour did not increase during lockdown either.

Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned reasons for caution in interpreting the results, the PELMEL survey is one of the very rare surveys studying the participation in the first and second round of the 2020 municipal elections (held, respectively, at the dawn of the “health crisis” in March and just after the first general lockdown in June 2020). This survey is thus useful for at least tentatively exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between political information consumption and electoral turnout.

In order to test our first and second hypotheses, we carried out two logistic regressions using the participation in the first round of municipal elections in March 2020 and the participation in the second round of municipal elections in June 2020 as dependent variables (see Table 4 in the Appendix and Figs. 1 and 2 in the next section). Whereas the first model allows us to study the relationship between political information consumption and participation in local elections, the comparison between first and second round allows us to evaluate the impact of the health crisis on this relationship. Our independent and control variables for each model are presented in Table 2. The control variables related to the degree of trust in healthcare institutions at the national and international level are only included for the second round because in March, these institutions were less visible or less linked to the

Moreover, although it may be that citizens who were already very interested in politics did not increase their media consumption, this does not affect the sample quality in our study as we weighted our sample by educational attainment.
Fig. 1 Log-odds of voting in the 2020 municipal elections (first round). Note: Point estimates show the log-odds of the models summarized in Table 4, with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline categories are being male, aged 45–59, with a high school education, on permanent employment, with some interest in politics, consuming local and national media once a week and never or rarely engaging in political discussions online. Source: PELMEL survey, 2020
Fig. 2 Log-odds of voting in the 2020 municipal elections (second round). Note: Point estimates show the log-odds of the models summarized in Table 4, with 95% confidence intervals. Baseline categories are being male, aged 45–59, with a high school education, on permanent employment, with some interest in politics, consuming local and national media once a week, never or rarely having political discussions online and neither trusting or distrusting the WHO, the French Health Council and Olivier Véran. Source: PELMEL survey, 2020
pandemic. They are the only variables related to the health crisis included in the survey.

Other political variables, such as trust in political parties, in politicians or in the government are not included because of the AIC reduction tests we ran: these variables seem to not influence electoral turnout in 2020 and the same result is observed in 2017 with data from the French Election Study (see below). Although the respondents’ declarations regarding their participation in the 2017 presidential election may suffer from some recall biases (Van Elsas et al. 2014), we integrate their reported participation in the 2017 election as an independent variable in the models. This allows us to account for a “benchmark” level of participation in prepandemic times, and to assess how political information consumption at the dawn of the pandemic and after the lockdown—while accounting for this previous tendency to participate—correlates with participation in 2020.

To compare the 2020 municipal elections with previous elections, we use the French Election Study of 2017, a post-electoral cross-sectional survey carried out through face-to-face interviews with 1830 French citizens between 9 May and 23 May 2017. The sample is representative of French citizens registered on voters’ lists in 2017 (French metropolitan territory, Corsica excepted) by the quotas method (age, gender, occupation, diploma, region, category of municipal agglomeration, vote in 2017 election for both rounds) (Gougou and Sauger 2017). This survey allows us to study the relationship between the consumption of newspapers and of political broadcasts to follow the electoral campaign and respondents’

Table 2  Variables in the models

| Variable                                           | Operationalization/measurement       |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Frequency of consumption (usually and during the   | Less than once a week, once a week   |
| lockdown) of local and national media for political | (reference category), once a day      |
| information                                       |                                      |
| Frequency of participation in online political     | Never or rarely (reference category),|
| discussions                                       | sometimes or often                   |
| Gender                                             | Female, male (reference category)    |
| Age                                                | 18–29-year-olds; 30–44-year-olds;    |
|                                                   | 44–59-year-olds; 60-year-olds and    |
|                                                   | over                                 |
| Educational attainment                             | Lower, equal (reference category),   |
|                                                   | or higher than the baccalaureate     |
| Current occupation or type of last job held        | Self-employed workers, fixed-term    |
|                                                   | employees, permanent employees       |
|                                                   | (reference category), never worked   |
| Interest in national politics                      | A lot; some (reference category); a  |
|                                                   | little; none                         |
| Vote in the first round of the 2017 presidential   | Voted, Didn’t vote (reference        |
| election                                           | category)                            |
| Trust in the WHO (just for second round)           | Yes, no, don’t know (reference      |
|                                                   | category)                            |
| Trust in the French Health Council (just for       | Yes, no, don’t know (reference      |
| second round)                                      | category)                            |
| Trust in Olivier Véran, Health Minister (just for  | Yes, no, don’t know (reference      |
| second round)                                      | category)                            |
participation in the two rounds of the 2017 presidential election (the last national election before the health crisis). To do this, we ran two logistic models (one for each round) using the following as independent variables: gender, age, occupation, level of education, interest in politics, and consumption of newspapers and
political broadcast to follow the 2017 electoral campaign (see Table 5 in Appendix and Fig. 3 in the next section).

**Results**

We have run a set of logistic regressions in order to explore the relationships between political information consumption and electoral participation. The results can be found in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 (where the log-odds for the four models are plotted) and in Tables 4 and 5 in the Appendix.

Our first hypothesis postulated that the more political information consumed by individuals—especially in the local media—the more they will tend to vote in the first round of the municipal elections. The results presented in Table 4 (Appendix) and Fig. 1 validate this first hypothesis. We find that the frequency of local media consumption for political information is positively and significantly related to the propensity to vote in this first round. Thus, 73% of the respondents who consume local media once a day participated in the first round of the 2020 municipal elections, whereas the proportion of respondents who consume local media once a week or less than once a week and who voted in the first round are way smaller (56.1 and 46.8%, respectively). However, while national media consumption for political information and online political discussions are also positively associated to the likelihood of casting a ballot, these relationships are not significant when we control for socio-demographic variables. Indeed, it seems that the propensity to vote in the first round of the municipal elections is influenced more by socio-demographic and political variables: being unemployed or having a low level of interest in politics are negatively correlated to participation and 30–44-year-old respondents are less likely to vote compared to 45–59 years old. Finally, respondents who voted in the 2017 presidential election are more mobilized in 2020, as expected.

Overall—and, as argued above, due the fact that the first round of elections took place at the beginning of the crisis—the relationship between political information consumption and voter turnout follows the classic pattern—with (local) media consumption being positively correlated with voting.

The next question we addressed is whether the lockdown affected these initial results. Our hypothesis is that, even in the context of the health crisis, the relationships between political information consumption and electoral participation in the second round are mostly similar. In other words, the determinants of mobilization—and political information consumption in particular—did not change between the first (held before lockdown) and the second round of the municipal elections (held after lockdown). Table 4 (in the Appendix) and Fig. 2 present the results regarding the second round. The socio-demographic variables—such as being inactive or a

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6 The positive coefficient associated to the 18–29 category could be explained by the fact that the youngest respondents, even if they are interested in politics, could not participate in the 2017 election because they were too young.
fixed-term employee—are more negatively associated with participation than other variables, while the level of interest in politics is positively associated with electoral mobilization. Interest in politics and occupation also play here a stronger role than in the first round. As suggested by Haute and colleagues (2021), the pandemic context may have reinforced the social inequalities of political participation.7

On the contrary, the variables directly related to the crisis context, such as trust in healthcare institutions, do not seem to be significantly associated with participation. While respondents who highly trust healthcare institutions participate more in the second round than respondents who have no opinion on the matter, respondents who declare having very low trust in healthcare institutions are also highly mobilized and these associations are not statistically significant.

In terms of political information, the respondents who consume local media irregularly (less than once a week) are less likely to have participated in the second round (51.8%) than the overall respondents (58.2%). As was the case in the first round, regular consumption of online political discussions is positively, but not significantly, associated with participation.

However, it is quite surprising to see that respondents who consume national or local media quite often (once a day) are not more likely to vote in the second round and that respondents who consume national media for political information irregularly are more mobilized than all respondents (64.8 versus 58.2%). Therefore, political information consumption via the local media, which is surprisingly less intense during the lockdown (see Table 1), is also less linked to electoral participation. A possible explanation for this is that the local media, like the national media, focused their attention on the health crisis and its handling during the lockdown and not on the campaign for the second round of the municipal elections. Thus, it might have been less easy for French citizens to regularly access political information, even more so concerning the local level, and the political information they did consume was more linked to the handling of the pandemic and less to the electoral campaign. The accuracy of our second hypothesis, arguing that the more individuals consumed political information—especially local media—during the peak of the pandemic, the more they tended to vote in the second round of the municipal elections is thus not confirmed by our data.

An additional model, not presented here (but available upon request), also includes the survey items measuring whether or not respondents reported an increased consumption of online content related to local and national politics during lockdown as an independent variable and did not show a significant effect of these two variables. In fact, respondents who reported consuming more online content about national politics (16.7% of respondents in constituencies where a second round was held) or about local politics (12.2% of respondents in constituencies where a second round was held) during lockdown participated slightly more in the second round of local elections (63.7 and 60.9%, respectively) than did respondents overall (58.2%). However, these differences are not statistically significant when controlling for respondents’ social status and interest in politics.

7 If we observe a negative coefficient for respondents with higher education achievement, this result is explained by the inclusion of 2017 participation as control variable. Indeed, the inequalities in participation linked to the level of education are less important in municipal elections than in presidential ones (Héran and Rouault, 1995).
In order to compare the 2020 health crisis context with patterns of participation in pre-pandemic times, we also tested the association between political information consumption and voter turnout in the 2017 presidential election, using the French Election Study 2017 survey data (see Table 5 in the Appendix and Fig. 3).

Our third hypothesis postulated that the more individuals consume political information—especially from the national media—the more they are likely to vote in a presidential election. Our hypothesis seems not to be validated. Indeed, the consumption of newspapers or of political broadcasts is not associated with respondents’ propensity to vote. Even if the respondents who consume newspapers or political broadcasts often are more mobilized than respondents who never do, with differences between 8.6 and 9.9 points (see Table 5), these differences are not significant if we consider socio-demographic variables and the level of interest in politics. Moreover, the level of interest in politics is not strongly correlated to the likelihood of electoral participation. Only the respondents who are not at all interested in politics are significantly less mobilized. In a national election where turnout is usually very high, political variables have a limited impact on political behaviours. On the contrary, socio-demographic variables have a strong and significant association with the propensity to participate: citizens who are younger, unemployed, less educated or working precariously tend to participate less than others (Braconnier et al. 2017).

Therefore, if the link between political information consumption and electoral participation appears to be weak during the health crisis, the comparison with the 2017 elections shows that this association is not one of the main predictors of electoral mobilization in France.

Discussion and conclusion

The literature seems to agree that the consumption of political information, especially via the news media, affects political participation, either positively or negatively. However, what happened, in times of pandemic, when people had other pressing concerns and COVID-19-related issues were likely to receive significant media coverage? This article explores this question in the case of the 2020 municipal elections campaign in France.

First, we show that, in France, political information consumption seems to have little effect on political participation. Socio-demographic variables are much more important than political information consumption for explaining the patterns of electoral participation. While relatively innovative, this finding is in line with results from previous studies by Boulianne (2015). The author shows, studying the links between online media exposure and electoral and extra-electoral political participation that, if this association is positive, it is sometimes weak in terms of statistical significance.

However, even if the effects of political information consumption on political participation are weak, our results show that these effects concern mostly the consumption of local media during the 2020 municipal elections (Min et al. 2020). From this point of view, our findings seem to support the “mobilization” hypothesis developed
by the literature, given that higher local media consumption has a positive effect on electoral participation in the first round of the municipal elections.

We also show that the association between political information consumption and participation varies according to both the type of election—municipal or presidential—and the type of media consumption (local or national, online or offline news media). From this point of view, it is interesting to note that, concerning the 2017 presidential election, there is no association between the consumption of newspapers or of political broadcasts and the propensity to vote. One explanation could be that in the French system the presidential election is more mobilizing (Gougou and Persico 2017). The share of participants in the election would then be so large that the variable “consumption of political information” would lose its explanatory power. Another important result is that the pandemic crisis seems to have had little effect on this trend. Indeed, the consumption of political information did not become more important in the second round (after the pandemic peaked) and did not lessen in any way the strong role of socio-demographic variables as predictors of turnout.

Overall, it is interesting to observe that in the context of a health crisis, both consuming information online and discussing politics online have had little effect on electoral mobilization. In other words, the limitations in social interactions imposed during the 2020 lockdown did not automatically mean that citizens resorted exclusively to digital media to find political information, and, more importantly, that these limitations negatively influenced their electoral participation.

This is a first, explorative study for assessing the association between political information consumption and political participation within the context of the pandemic crisis and thus is not without its shortcomings. Above all, as outlined in detail in the method section, the main limitation affecting the interpretation and generalizability of our results is the specific manner chosen here to empirically measure the political information consumed by citizens. Nevertheless, we believe that these limitations, while worth keeping in mind, do not weaken the interest and relevance of this study. On the contrary, our preliminary research provides a first exploration of the subject matter and demonstrates the need for further analysis of the association between political information consumption and political participation in the context of a pandemic crisis.

### Table 3

| Source: PELMEL survey 2020; Field: voters registered for the first round of 2020 elections (N=699 respondents) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Table 3** Association between political information consumption and political interest (V of Cramer) |
| | Before the crisis | During the lock-down |
| Interest in national politics and national media consumption | 0.26 | 0.09 |
| Interest in national politics and online political discussion | 0.27 | 0.24 |
| Interest in local politics and local media consumption | 0.25 | 0.09 |
| Variable                                | % Voted in the first round | Log-odds (SE) | % Voted in the second round | Log-odds (SE) |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| **Full sample**                        |                             |              |                             |              |
| Consumption of national media          |                             |              |                             |              |
| Less than once a week                  | 45.6                        | 0.01 (0.36)  | 64.8                        | 1.20*** (0.36) |
| Once a week                            | 54.5                        | ref          | 49.0                        | ref          |
| Once a day                             | 64.9                        | 0.12 (0.27)  | 58.9                        | 0.58 (0.31)  |
| Consumption of local media             |                             |              |                             |              |
| Less than once a week                  | 46.8                        | 0.03 (0.30)  | 51.8                        | −0.81** (0.37) |
| Once a week                            | 56.1                        | ref          | 70.8                        | ref          |
| Once a day                             | 73                          | 0.66** (0.29)| 63.7                        | −0.32 (0.41) |
| Online political discussion            |                             |              |                             |              |
| Never or rarely                        | 57.5                        | ref          | 55.3                        | ref          |
| Often or sometimes                     | 67.3                        | 0.13 (0.25)  | 69.5                        | 0.21 (0.32)  |
| Gender                                 |                             |              |                             |              |
| Male                                   | 60.7                        | ref          | 63.4                        | ref          |
| Female                                 | 59.5                        | 0.11 (0.21)  | 53.9                        | −0.32 (0.27) |
| Age                                    |                             |              |                             |              |
| 18–19                                  | 53.8                        | 0.58* (0.34) | 54.1                        | 0.65* (0.37) |
| 30–44                                  | 51.1                        | −0.43* (0.26)| 53.4                        | 0.01 (0.33)  |
| 45–59                                  | 62.7                        | ref          | 55.6                        | ref          |
| 60 or over                             | 69.1                        | 0.27 (0.29)  | 67.9                        | 0.48 (0.40)  |
| Educational attainment                 |                             |              |                             |              |
| Less than high school                  | 57.9                        | −0.34 (0.27) | 55.9                        | −0.16 (0.33) |
| High school                            | 59.6                        | ref          | 60.0                        | ref          |
| Higher education                       | 64.3                        | −0.19 (0.26) | 61.0                        | −0.56* (0.30) |
| Occupation (current or last)           |                             |              |                             |              |
| Permanent employee                     | 65.8                        | ref          | 65.1                        | ref          |
| Non-permanent employee                 | 55.1                        | −0.27 (0.29) | 46.0                        | −0.79** (0.31) |
| Self-employed                          | 68.4                        | 0.08 (0.40)  | 77.1                        | 0.39 (0.46)  |
| Never worked                           | 27.7                        | −1.18*** (0.36) | 26.9                        | −1.44*** (0.52) |
| Interest in politics                   |                             |              |                             |              |
| A lot                                  | 75.8                        | 0.43 (0.29)  | 82.0                        | 0.72** (0.33) |
| Some                                   | 63.5                        | ref          | 61.3                        | ref          |
| Little                                 | 46.8                        | −0.59** (0.28)| 43.6                        | −0.66** (0.32) |
Table 4 (continued)

| Variable                                           | % Voted in the first round | Log-odds (SE) | % Voted in the second round | Log-odds (SE) |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Voted in 2017 presidential election (first round)  |                            |               |                            |               |
| None                                               | 45.8                       | −0.24 (0.34)  | 25.9                       | −1.14*** (0.42)|
| No                                                 | 27.9                       | ref           | 38.5                       | ref           |
| Yes                                                |                            |               |                            |               |
| Trust in WHO                                       |                            |               |                            |               |
| Yes                                                |                            |               |                            |               |
| Don’t know                                         | 64.4                       | 0.03 (0.37)   | 65                         | 0.82** (0.33) |
| No                                                 | 48.3                       | ref           | 63.2                       | 0.16 (0.36)   |
| Trust in Health Council                            |                            |               |                            |               |
| Yes                                                |                            |               |                            |               |
| Don’t know                                         | 69.7                       | 0.48 (0.39)   | 65                         | 0.04 (0.39)   |
| No                                                 | 49.4                       | ref           | 61.5                       | 0.36 (0.38)   |
| Trust in Health Minister                           |                            |               |                            |               |
| Yes                                                |                            |               |                            |               |
| Don’t know                                         | 73.9                       | 0.41 (0.33)   | 66.2                       | 0.41 (0.33)   |
| No                                                 | 47.2                       | ref           | 66.2                       | 0.41 (0.33)   |
| N (respondents)                                    | 699                        |               | 513                        |               |
| Akaike information criterion                       |                            | 824.22        |                            | 614.08        |
| Pseudo-R2                                          | 0.21                       |               |                            | 0.25          |

Baseline categories are marked as “ref” (i.e. reference category). Both models are estimated on survey-weighted observations using the “survey” R package (Lumley, 2020), with pseudo-R2 statistics computed using the Nagelkerke method (Lumley 2017). Design-based standard errors for the log-odds are shown in brackets. Two-tailed p values: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1. The “survey” R package fits weighted logistic regression models by maximizing the Horvitz–Thompson estimator of the population log-likelihood, which means that they do not have a pseudo log-likelihood (Lumley 2020). Source: PELMEL survey 2020
| Variable                              | % Voted in the first round | Log-odds (SE) | % Voted in the second round | Log-odds (SE) |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Full sample                           | 85.3                        | 80.6          |                            |               |
| Gender                                |                             |               |                            |               |
| Male                                  | 83.7                        | ref           | 79.1                       | ref           |
| Female                                | 86.5                        | 0.33** (0.15) | 81.9                       | 0.30** (0.13) |
| Age                                   |                             |               |                            |               |
| 18–19                                 | 76.7                        | −0.83*** (0.24)| 68.1                       | −0.85*** (0.21)|
| 30–44                                 | 81                          | −0.77*** (0.22)| 75.2                       | −0.75*** (0.20)|
| 45–59                                 | 89.5                        | ref           | 86.2                       | ref           |
| 60 or over                            | 89.2                        | 0.05 (0.21)   | 86.6                       | 0.04 (0.19)   |
| Educational attainment                |                             |               |                            |               |
| Less than high school                 | 81.6                        | −0.49** (0.19)| 79.4                       | −0.13 (0.17)  |
| High school                           | 85.8                        | ref           | 78.6                       | ref           |
| Higher education                      | 91.1                        | 0.32 (0.22)   | 83.8                       | 0.16 (0.19)   |
| Occupation (current or last)          |                             |               |                            |               |
| Permanent employee                    | 87.4                        | ref           | 84                         | ref           |
| Non-permanent employee                | 77.1                        | −0.40* (0.24) | 71.8                       | −0.43** (0.19)|
| Self-employed                         | 88.7                        | 0 (0.24)      | 84.4                       | −0.05 (0.21)  |
| Never worked                          | 80.2                        | −0.31 (0.21)  | 71.4                       | −0.53*** (0.18)|
| Interest in politics                  |                             |               |                            |               |
| A lot                                 | 91.2                        | 0.17 (0.27)   | 84.9                       | 0.03 (0.22)   |
| Some                                  | 88.4                        | ref           | 84                         | ref           |
| Little                                | 86                          | −0.06 (0.19)  | 81.6                       | −0.09 (0.17)  |
| None                                  | 68.1                        | −1*** (0.23)  | 64.5                       | −0.88*** (0.22)|
| Consumption of political broadcasts to follow the campaign |                             |               |                            |               |
| Often                                 | 88.4                        | −0.11 (0.18)  | 82.9                       | −0.23 (0.17)  |
| Sometimes                              | 84.8                        | ref           | 81.2                       | ref           |
| Never                                 | 78.4                        | −0.07 (0.34)  | 73.5                       | −0.19 (0.19)  |
| consumption of newspapers to follow the campaign |                             |               |                            |               |
| Often                                 | 90.7                        | 0.27 (0.21)   | 85.3                       | 0.23 (0.18)   |
| Sometimes                              | 84.5                        | ref           | 80.1                       | ref           |
| Never                                 | 80.8                        | 0.06 (0.17)   | 76.7                       | 0.03 (0.16)   |
| Akaike information criterion (AIC)    |                             | 1431.70       | 1701.17                    |               |
Baseline categories are marked as “ref” (i.e., reference category). Both models are estimated on survey-weighted observations using the “survey” R package (Lumley, 2020), with pseudo-R2 statistics computed using the Nagelkerke method (Lumley, 2017). Design-based standard errors for the log-odds are shown in brackets. Two-tailed p values: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The “survey” R package fits weighted logistic regression models by maximizing the Horvitz–Thompson estimator of the population log-likelihood, which means that they do not have a pseudo log-likelihood (Lumley, 2020). Source: French Election Study 2017, $n = 1816$; data provided by the CDSP.

| Variable | % Voted in the first round | Log-odds (SE) | % Voted in the second round | Log-odds (SE) |
|----------|---------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| PseudoR2 | 0.07                      |              | 0.07                        |              |
Appendix

See Tables 3, 4, 5

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Data Availability We can provide the full dataset for replication upon request at any stage of the submission process.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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