



# Candidate and party bias in the news and its effects on party choice: Evidence from Austria

Günther Lengauer, David Johann\*

Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Vienna, Rathausstraße 19/1/9, Vienna, Austria

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of exposure to actor-related news bias on party choice in the 2008 Austrian elections. More specifically, this work introduces relative and relational measures of party and candidate biases in electoral reporting and outlines their effects on vote choice. The applied integrative understanding of party and candidate bias in the news, combining visibility and valence, results in a single measure classifying parties and party leaders in media-outlet-specific bias spectra. To measure bias exposure effects on party choice, the candidate and party bias levels in each newspaper are weighted with the individual exposure to these papers. This study rests on the analytical linkage between a media content analysis of Austrian daily newspapers and a representative post-election survey. Firstly, this investigation shows that the Austrian newspaper coverage is characterized by clear, not uniform but rather outlet-specific, biases toward parties and their leaders. Above all, the tabloid press primarily focuses on a strong polarization and *duelization* regarding the parties and the leaders contesting for chancellorship. Secondly, in a case study investigating the effects of news bias exposure on party choice regarding the governing parties, we find a positive relation between high exposure to advantageous party and candidate biases in newspapers and the probability to vote for the respective party.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the volatility of the electorate and processes of political dealignment have been intensifying. Consequently, more instantaneous political campaigning and media portrayals of campaigns, parties, and candidates take on greater significance for party choice as voters increasingly decide at shorter notice (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004; LeDuc, Niemi, & Norris, 2010). A key assumption in this context is that political bias in the news may trigger effects on voters' political perception, attitudes, or behavior (Semetko, 2003). Earlier research mainly concluded that exposure to news in general and to specific news content in particular may affect voters in a variety of ways (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Hillygus & Jackman, 2003; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2010). Most previous studies focusing on the impact of media content on voting deal with concepts such as agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002), priming (Druckman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996), or economic cues (Shah, Domke, Fan,

Fibson, & Watts, 1999) but less with the effects of the overall visibility and tone of political protagonists (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002; Weaver, 1996). This is problematic as Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, and de Ridder (2007) showed that not only mediated depictions of specific issue positions may be effective but also more general demonstrations of the parties' competence, as well as overall depictions of general support and criticism or of success and failure. We thus look at potential conjoint effects of actor-related news bias (Hofstetter, 1976) arising from imbalance regarding the visibility and tone allotted to political contestants in the electoral newspaper coverage.

Although over the last few years research on news bias effects has been increasingly extended to European political communication contexts (e.g. Hopmann et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007), previous investigations on this topic were predominantly US-centered (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Hence, earlier research in this field mostly rested on personalized campaigns that involve two opposing, individual contestants in clear-cut duel situations. However, such an approach may not be sufficient for elaborating political imbalance and bias in the news in European multiparty systems. This study aims to correct some limitations partly originating from this US-centeredness. While the distinction between candidate and party bias may seem rather synthetic for the US context, it is useful when investigating news bias in the Austrian party-centered, proportional list voting context (Karvonen, 2004).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 1 4277 49910.

E-mail addresses: [guenther.lengauer@uibk.ac.at](mailto:guenther.lengauer@uibk.ac.at) (G. Lengauer), [david.johann@univie.ac.at](mailto:david.johann@univie.ac.at) (D. Johann).

Therefore, we not only investigate party-related bias effects, but also additive, although more indirect, candidate effects (in the form of candidate bias in the news) on party choice.

By dissolving the established juxtaposition of the effects of visibility and tone on party choice or party preference (e.g. Hopmann et al., 2010; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999), the present article (1) examines the extent of party and candidate biases in the 2008 Austrian campaign coverage of leading newspapers to provide basis for an effect study that asks, (2) whether and to what extent these news biases affect party choice and (3) which is more effective – party bias or candidate bias. In particular, drawing on a content analysis of the election coverage of national daily papers and on a post-election survey among Austrian voters, a case study concentrating on the ruling parties, the SPÖ and the ÖVP, investigates how exposure to actor-related news biases actually influenced party choice in the 2008 Austrian parliamentary elections.

Our study enhances the empirical research on media effects, firstly by introducing an innovative and integrated measure of actor-related news bias that regards quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and secondly by analytically combining content-related news bias and actual exposure to these biases to develop a realistic model of capturing news bias effects concerning individual party choice.

Building on a brief synopsis and categorization of earlier concepts of political bias in the news, we formulate hypotheses regarding potential effects of news bias on vote choice. We then introduce a refined, relational, as well as relative concept of actor-related news bias that merges visibility and tone into an integrative, media-outlet-specific measure of bias regarding parties and candidates. Afterwards, we present the data, elaborate on the methodology, and present the empirical findings based on a concerted content analysis and a representative post-election survey. Finally, we discuss the results and state implications for future research.

## 2. The concept of political bias in the news

Condensing the research on news bias, we may categorize past approaches basically as either process- or outcome-oriented. Whereas process-oriented conceptualizations mainly focus on the formative origins of bias (why does bias emerge?), outcome-oriented concepts primarily concentrate on the manifestation of bias and its effects. Thereby, process- and, as such, context-oriented (Semetko, 2003) discussions on news bias encounter two main camps: whereas one group accentuates ideology as the driving force behind political bias in the news (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Niven, 2002; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999), the second camp identifies market-driven news values structurally favoring the contemporary and immediate, the deviant, the unexpected, adversarial and bad news as the main foundation of bias (Kuypers, 2002). This latter form of bias is also labeled as “structural bias” (Hofstetter, 1976; Price & Feldman, 2009; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2007). In contrast, outcome-oriented approaches primarily focus on analyzing the magnitude and effects of political imbalance (e.g. Hopmann et al., 2010; Norris et al., 1999). Here, we take such an outcome-oriented approach on bias in the news regarding parties and their top candidates by investigating its extent and potential effects on the Austrian electorate.

Referring to the operational definition of news bias, past research mainly focused on proportions of issue stands in the news that were assigned to particular political camps. These issue-based approaches are also labeled as “coverage bias” (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Other definitions of bias refer to the actors concerned. These approaches mainly look at biases, resulting from imbalance

concerning the amount and/or tone of coverage that is devoted to specific political protagonists (e.g. Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002). This actor-related approach toward bias is our point of departure and vastly corresponds with the concept of “statement bias”, introduced by D'Alessio and Allen (2000), which is mainly concerned with the comparison of media favorability toward actors (see also Brandenburg, 2005). Thereby, to differentiate *candidate bias* from *party bias* is analytically useful to disentangle institutional and individual carriers of bias in the news and the associated effects. As our analytical focus is on actor-related forms of news bias, our further deliberation exclusively concentrates on party and candidate bias.

## 3. Empirical evidence on actor-related news bias effects on voters

Earlier research on the effects of actor-related news bias primarily circle around two main dimensions that were treated as discrete predictors of party choice or party preference: the amount and/or the tone of coverage. In an experiment regarding the 1997 British elections, Norris et al. (1999) found no significant impact of varying TV appearances of parties on the voters' preferences. However, drawing on the amount of coverage assigned to parties and politicians in the 2007 Danish election coverage on TV news, Hopmann et al. (2010) demonstrated, first and foremost for undecided voters, that the more visible a party was, the more people were inclined to actually vote for this party. Additionally, Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis (2000) showed for the 1998 Dutch national elections that greater media visibility of party leaders increased the likelihood to also vote for the respective party. This latter piece of evidence substantiates the notion that even in party-centered voting systems it does make analytical sense to distinguish between party and candidate biases to discretely investigate the additional, indirect effects of candidate bias on party choice.

We now turn our attention to the second and more qualitative dimension of actor-related bias, the tone of coverage, as voters may not exclusively decide on whom they (get to) know but also what they (get to) know about these political protagonists. For example, Norris et al. (1999) illustrated in their seminal work that tone, more than the amount of coverage, led voters to change their evaluations of political parties. Thereby, positive coverage gave rise to significant (positive) effects on party preference, whereas negative evaluations remained effectless. Referring to the same data set, Ladd and Lenz (2009) contrasted panel survey data with the editorial stance of newspapers to compare readers of papers that switched endorsements between 1992 and 1997 to voters who were not exposed to these papers. By doing so, they found a considerable share of voters who accordingly changed political sides after the endorsement switch in the papers. In the US context, Druckman and Parkin (2005) found compelling evidence for the 2000 Minnesota Senate race that editorial slant led to a change in the candidates' evaluation, which then influenced voting decisions. Additionally, Kahn and Kenney (2002) examined the newspaper coverage of more than 60 US Senatorial campaigns between 1988 and 1992, and concluded that supportive, endorsement-driven coverage also affected the preferences of voters toward the candidates. Fournier et al. (2004), who matched cross-sectional survey data with content analysis data regarding late-night TV news in the 1997 Canadian election campaign, affirmatively demonstrated that the media's tone toward parties had a significant effect on undecided voters.

In a recent and advanced approach, Hopmann et al. (2010) provided qualifying results concerning the effects of television visibility and tone of politicians on party preference. They concluded that the valence regarding party representatives becomes effectless

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