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RESEARCH NOTE



The hostile media: politicians' perceptions of coverage bias

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ABSTRACT

Politicians seem to be increasingly criticising the traditional news media for being biased. While scholars usually argue that politicians make such claims out of strategic concerns – they try to undermine the credibility of the potentially harmful media – it might as well be that they actually believe there is a bias in traditional news coverage. Though this so-called hostile media effect – the idea that news content is biased against one's own ideas or party – is often studied with citizens, it has rarely been examined among politicians. However, in this paper it is studied, drawing on a unique survey in which 183 Belgian politicians were asked to what extent they perceived different media outlets to produce (un)favourable coverage about their party. The exploration shows that politicians, in general, have the tendency to perceive the news media as slightly biased against their party. Importantly, media hostility perceptions are more outspoken among politicians from right-wing parties and among politicians in high-level functions. Interestingly, politicians' perceptions of partisan bias differ across outlets; especially the outlets that are used by non-party voters are considered to be biased.

KEYWORDS Media bias; elite perceptions; elite survey; political communication; political parallelism

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential elections, U.S. president Donald Trump repeatedly referred to the traditional press as being 'the true enemy of the people'. To enforce the idea that he is treated unfairly by the media, he has systematically labelled news items as '*fake news*'. The phenomenon of political elites criticising journalists and the content they produce, is by no means new. In 1972, President Richard Nixon and his administration even turned media criticism into a formal political strategy with the Vice President giving speeches all around the country, attacking the news media (Coyne 1972). Claims about the media covering politics in a biased way have been on the rise from the 1950s onwards, evolving from a marginal phenomenon to a rhetoric frequently used by elites (Domke *et al.* 1999). Although

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the U.S. – with a polarized political and media system – is different from many European multiparty systems, politicians in other countries too regularly accuse the news media of covering politics in a unfair way (Newman *et al.* 2017). For instance, in Belgium, the country under study here, anecdotal evidence of media criticism is abundantly available. The leader of the largest party, for example, responded to a news item about an initiative of his party aired by the public broadcaster as follows: ‘The conscious framing of the public broadcast makes me feel sick! How can you be so incompetent and disgusting?’ (Het Nieuwsblad 2016).

Elite assertions about biases in the news may have far reaching consequences for citizens’ trust in the news media, which additionally endangers the broader informative role of the media (Smith 2010). Experimental work has shown that elite claims affect citizens’ media bias perceptions and, as a consequence, their overall interpretation of actual news content (e.g. Ladd 2010). As Lee (2005: 44) argues: ‘Elites’ frequent complaints have convinced both the media and the public about the existence of such a bias’. When the news media’s credibility and objectivity is questioned by those in power, the crucial watchdog function of media is endangered (Smith 2010).

But why do politicians adopt a hostile rhetoric towards the news media? Scholars only formulated partial answers. One well-established explanation is that elites *strategically* try to weaken the news media’s credibility (Smith 2010). As Domke *et al.* (1999: 39) put it: ‘Media criticism might help to shield the candidate in the minds of voters against further negative coverage they encounter’. Thus, arguing that the coverage of a certain news outlet is unfair or biased, politicians try to defend themselves against any (future) criticism that might come their way, regardless of whether they believe there truly is a bias (Domke *et al.* 1999).

However, the strategic explanation for media criticism does not rule out the possibility that elites genuinely believe that news coverage is biased.¹ Considering politicians as strategic actors who merely attack the media to influence voters may ignore a complex reality in which politicians perceive news coverage to be biased and voice this concern. Whether politicians truly believe there is a bias or whether they simply criticize the media for strategic reasons is an important distinction. After all, research has shown that politicians who believe their ideology is treated unfairly in the media are a lot less likely to get in touch with journalists (Matthes *et al.* 2019). Such avoidance behaviour can, ironically, increase actual biases in journalists’ reporting, since (some) politicians might systematically refrain from providing information to news outlets. If politicians are simply strategic in their media criticism, there is no reason to expect this kind of avoidance behaviour. In sum, real dissatisfaction with media coverage generates a deeply troubled relationship

between politicians and journalists, dictated by cynicism and distrust. It leads to structural alienation that is not temporary or targeted at specific outlets but that deeply affects the, for a democracy, crucial relationship between both actors (e.g. Aalberg and Strömbäck 2011; Brants *et al.* 2010; Elmelund-Præstekær *et al.* 2011).

Notwithstanding the issue's obvious importance, hardly any studies, with the exception of the one by Matthes *et al.* (2019), have looked into whether politicians actually *believe* the media are biased against their party. Therefore, this study sets out to examine the level of politicians' perceptions of partisan media bias, and additionally explores variation in politicians' perceptions, both by looking at elite and outlet characteristics.

Why would elites think the media are against them?

Journalists and politicians are highly dependent on each other; the former need the latter for political inside information, the latter need the former for visibility to get re-elected (Blumler and Gurevitch 2002). In this context of mutual dependency, one crucial question is how those two actors get along. Some level of distrust between the two should not come as a surprise: politicians can withhold information, while journalists can exploit their role as gatekeeper (e.g. Brants *et al.* 2010). Especially recent mediatization trends seem to have put some pressure on their relationship, which inspired scholars to survey politicians about their general satisfaction with news coverage and with journalists' activities more broadly (e.g. Aalberg and Strömbäck 2011; Elmelund-Præstekær *et al.* 2011). These studies enhance our understanding of how politicians evaluate political news content, by showing for example that they are rather skeptical about media's political agenda-setting power (Maurer and Pfetsch 2014), their framing of political events (Brants *et al.* 2010), or other aspects related to the media imposing their logic on politics (Domke *et al.* 1999). This work has shown that many political elites are quite frustrated with the fourth power, and especially with its influence on politics.

A lot less is known, however, about a specific and important characteristic of news that politicians might be frustrated about, namely the *partisan objectivity* of their coverage. The idea that journalists should tell their stories in an impartial way and provide balanced information, is a prominent principle in journalistic deontological codes (Ryan 2001), and the violation of this principle – when news coverage clearly favours one party over another, for example – is commonly referred to as *media bias* (Lee 2005). A lot of studies have explored citizens' perceptions of such bias and results show that they even perceive balanced information as biased against their views, a psychological effect that has been labelled the 'hostile media phenomenon'. This

phenomenon, first studied experimentally by Vallone *et al.* (1985), has been replicated and confirmed in a variety of different contexts addressing a variety of topics (see Hansen and Kim (2011) for a meta-analysis). Interestingly, Reid (2012) finds that citizens' perceptions of partisan media bias are amplified when political identity is made salient. Therefore, we expect politicians – who in comparison feel exceptionally strongly connected with a certain ideology (party) – to be even more susceptible to perceive news media coverage as 'hostile' against *their party*. The only study we know of that more or less examines perceptions of partisan bias is Matthes *et al.*'s (2019) work on politicians' perceptions of *ideological* bias. Specifically, they asked politicians to position both themselves and the *entire* media system on a left–right scale and subtracting one from the other, they show that (some) politicians perceive quite a substantial ideological gap with the press. Also, they show that politicians with more extreme ideologies perceive the ideological gap to be larger. Our study is different and complementary as it looks at partisan instead of broad ideological biases and as it includes separate ratings of all relevant media outlets in a political system.

Also, we have virtually no idea why some politicians are more prone to perceive partisan bias than others. Exploring such variation is crucial, as it might explain why some individuals and parties have a more troubled relationship with the press. The literature on citizens' hostile media perceptions has shown that conservative or right-wing citizens believe the press to favour liberal or left-wing ideas and actors – relying on the argument that journalists themselves are more liberal (Lee 2005). We have no clue, though, whether media bias perceptions are more common among right-wing politicians too. Anecdotal evidence suggests that rightist politicians more often publicly attack the press, but is it merely strategic or do they actually *perceive* more biases?

Finally, it seems plausible that even if politicians perceive *the* media to be biased, that they consider some outlets to be more biased than others. We know that in many countries outlet audiences are segregated by partisanship, meaning that, for instance, some newspapers are typically read by specific party supporters. This is a crucial indicator of what political communication scholars commonly refer to as *political parallelism* (Goldman and Mutz 2011). We wonder whether politicians perceive the media that are not consumed by their supporters to be more biased compared to outlets that are typically consumed by their supporters.

Data and methods

We focus on the case of Belgium, more particularly on Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Belgium is a least likely case for finding

Table 1. Sample of politicians and response rate.

	Population	Sample	Response rate %
National MPs	87	69	79.3%
Regional MPs	124	95	76.6%
National ministers	11	8	72.7%
Regional ministers	9	5	55.6%
Party leaders	6	6	100.0%

that politicians believe news content is biased for different reasons. Apart from the multiparty political context, the Belgian media system – similar to other Western-European countries – has been categorized as ‘democratic-corporatist’, implying strong professionalization and a substantial level of state intervention to protect press freedom (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Important here is that Belgian newspapers have historically been characterized by political parallelism but that, today, the formal ideological affiliation between outlets and parties has disappeared entirely (De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007).

We draw on survey data collected within a larger study² interviewing elected politicians between March and June 2018. 183 politicians, including members of the national and regional parliaments, national and regional ministers, and party leaders collaborated, leaving us with an exceptional response rate of 77 per cent (Table 1).³ Due to missing answers on some variables, the actual number of politicians in the analyses is slightly lower.

In the presence of a researcher, politicians completed a 30-minute online questionnaire. The question of interest here is the following: *‘Below is a list of Flemish news media. Can you indicate for each of these to what extent you have the impression that they disadvantage or favour your party – on a scale ranging from (0) strongly advantaging to (10) strongly disadvantaging’*. Eight different news outlets – including all major Flemish newspapers and both Flemish television newscasts – were presented. Our dependent variable is perceived media hostility, which has a separate value for each of the outlets. Politicians were questioned about perceived biases against their party, which makes sense in the Belgian political context in which parties are by far the most important political actors, and a large majority of politicians rarely gets covered in the press. To avoid making it overly complex, politicians gave their general perceptions of media bias and were not asked to distinguish different dimensions of (dis)favourability (e.g. access, tone, framing) (see Goldman and Mutz 2011).

An important matter we should address is whether politicians gave true answers matching their actual perceptions or whether their answers are strategic in the sense that they want to convey the image that they are

under fire and, in this way, harm the credibility of the press. The only thing we can say is that the interview context discouraged strategic answers; it was fully anonymous and politicians were made aware of this, they knew their answers would be strictly confidential. Importantly, the interviews were part of a longitudinal series of elite interviews and in the two previous waves the same rule applied and no information from the surveys reached the public realm. So, politicians were aware that giving ‘false’ strategic answers would be trivial and bear no effect.

Results

Collapsing politicians’ perceptions of media bias across the different news outlets, we get an average score of perceived media hostility for each politician;⁴ the distribution of this dependent variable is shown in [Figure 1](#) below. What we learn from this graph is that most politicians – with an average score of 5.7 (SD = 0.93) on an 11-point scale – believe that their party is (at least slightly) disadvantaged by the news media. No less than 75 per cent of all politicians position their party on the ‘disadvantaged’ side of the scale (+5) while the others perceive news coverage of their party as neutral or (slightly) advantageous. Interestingly, around 10 per cent of the elites even believe their party is *strongly* disadvantaged in the press (7 or more). Thus, in line with our expectation, most politicians believe the news media are ‘hostile’ towards their party. Importantly, there

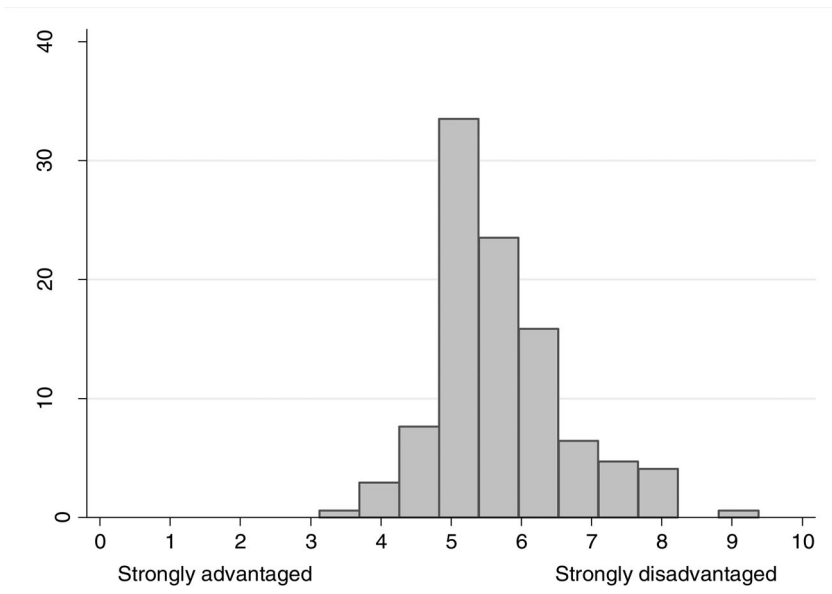


Figure 1. Perceived media hostility of Belgian politicians (N = 170).

is substantial variation in politicians' perceptions of news media bias, variation that will now be further explored.

In order to find out why some politicians perceive some news outlets to be more hostile towards their party than others, we stack our dataset to a 'long' format in which each politician is represented eight times – once for every news outlet they rated. Instead of taking an average score of perceived media bias across all outlets, this approach allows us to examine whether news coverage of different outlets is perceived differently by politicians. To account for this data structure, we run multilevel linear models with random effects on the level of individual politicians, predicting politicians' perceived media hostility. The independent variables of interest are politicians' leadership status (top versus backbencher politicians) their party (left, center, or right-wing), type of news outlet (popular versus quality and television versus newspaper) and partisanship of audiences. Additionally, we control for politicians' age and gender in the models. [Table 2](#) below presents the results.⁵

In model 1, we first of all see that *party ideology* affects politicians' perceptions of media hostility. Politicians belonging to right-wing parties (*Flemish-nationalist and Extreme-right party*) feel significantly more disadvantaged compared to their more leftist colleagues (*Green and Socialist party*), while there is no significant difference between politicians belonging to left and center parties (*Christian-Democrats and Liberals*). The effect is potent: right-wing politicians score on average 14 percent higher on the 11-point perceived hostility scale compared to their colleagues. Especially the radical right *Vlaams Belang* stands out, which is in line with the anti-elitist claims they often make (Mudde 2004). This result also matches earlier findings showing that right-wing citizens believe the 'liberal' press is more hostile towards their ideas (Lee 2005). While

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression predicting politicians' perceived media hostility.

	Model 1 Coeff. (Std. Err.)	Model 2 Coeff. (Std. Err.)	Model 3 Coeff. (Std. Err.)
High-level politicians	0.28 (0.15)*	0.28 (0.15)*	0.28 (0.15)*
Party (ref. = left)			
Center	0.04 (0.17)	0.05 (0.17)	0.20 (0.18)
Right	0.78 (0.17)***	0.77 (0.17)***	1.1 (0.18)***
Television outlet	–	–0.41 (0.09)***	–0.45 (0.09)***
Commercial outlet	–	–0.80 (0.08)***	–0.84 (0.08)***
Partisanship of audiences	–	–	–0.61 (0.08)***
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Sex	–0.03 (0.14)	–0.03 (0.14)	–0.03 (0.14)
Constant	5.2 (0.41)***	5.8 (0.41)***	5.9 (0.41)***
Variance (politicians)	0.68	0.70	0.70
Variance (residual)	1.4	1.4	1.4
N	1,348 (170)	1,348 (170)	1,348 (170)
AIC (0 model = 5,034)	5,014	4,910	4,858

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.1$.

criticism towards news media is known to be more often voiced by right-wing politicians (Domke *et al.* 1999), we find here that they actually *feel* more disadvantaged by the news media as well. This may imply that their media criticism is more than just a political strategy but rests on the true conviction that they are treated unfairly by the media. Second, we find that *leadership status* matters; current and former elite politicians (party leaders, ministers, speakers of the house, and parliamentary party group leaders) feel significantly more disadvantaged compared to their backbencher colleagues (a difference of 5 percent). An intuitive explanation for elite politicians' more strongly felt media hostility might be that they are more preoccupied with whether and how their party is covered in the news. The importance they devote to the media and their engagement in the daily struggle over the news might trigger frustration with how they are dealt with by the press. From a normative perspective, this finding is worrisome: a troubled relationship between journalists and, in particular, high-ranking politicians is problematic. The latter have access to exclusive political inside information, and they potentially reach a wider audience when they criticize the media.

Model 2 indicates that the type of news outlet matters. All news outlets were classified into 'popular' and 'quality' outlets.⁶ The analysis shows that quality media are perceived more hostile than popular outlets. The effect is substantial; elite outlets score on average 13 per cent higher (more hostile) on the 11-point scale. One explanation might be that elite outlets generally have more extensive coverage on political issues, which allows for more (critical) journalistic interpretation (see Soontjens 2019). The same argument applies to newspaper coverage as opposed to television news reports; the latter is perceived as significantly less hostile.

Moving on to model 3, we see that, even though news outlets in Belgium are no longer aligned with parties, there still is some association in the minds of politicians. Specifically, we find that (the remainder of) political parallelism⁷ – the fact that ideology is correlated with the use of specific news outlets – substantially affects politicians' perceptions of partisan bias. Compared to outlets of which the audiences' ideology matches that of the party, other outlets are perceived much more hostile, a difference of no less than 21% on the hostility scale.

Conclusion

Even in a non-partisan media system like the Belgian one, politicians have the tendency to perceive the news media as biased against their party. Mirroring findings for citizens, media hostility perceptions are more outspoken among politicians from right-wing parties. Going beyond

previous work, we found that politicians with a powerful political function hold more negative perceptions of the press. The irony is that those politicians who personally receive a lot of media coverage are also those who are most unhappy with the coverage they and their party get. Also, we find that politicians perceive some outlets as more ‘hostile’ than others, with partisanship of audiences as the most profound explanation.

This pioneering study asks for follow-up research in two directions. First, we cannot make the claim that elites’ hostile media perceptions are driving their media criticism. Yet, our findings make it likely that media criticism is not only driven by strategic considerations – a widely accepted idea among scholars – but also by genuine perceptions of media bias. Others should examine whether it is indeed the politicians who believe the media are biased who, more than other politicians, attack them for being biased. Second, our study is based on observational survey evidence; the way forward is to conduct experiments with elites, just as has been done with citizens, on when and why elites come to believe the media cover them unfavourably. In any case, we hope to have shown that examining elite perceptions of hostile media is a new and promising way to tackle how political actors are dealing with the news.

Notes

1. Note that another possible cause of elites’ media critique may be the fact that coverage is indeed biased. Politicians would then just be explicating the truly biased nature of the media. Empirical evidence with regard to media bias is inconclusive (see De Swert 2011). However, regardless of this objective reality, it is politicians’ perceptions that drive their behaviour.
2. Interviews were conducted within the framework of the POLPOP-project in Flanders, led by Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp (Belgium), with funding from the national science foundation FWO (grant number G012517N). Together with our colleagues Pauline Ketelaars, Kirsten Van Camp, and Julie Sevenans, we interviewed 183 politicians.
3. Proportionally as many politicians from each party were willing to participate. There is no self-selection bias.
4. This average perception of bias conceals differences in politicians’ ratings across outlets. Politicians do not uniformly evaluate all outlets as being biased against them or not; they rate some outlets significantly higher and lower than others. Most politicians (60%) rate some outlets as disadvantaging them (score > 5) and other outlets as advantaging them (score < 5). On average, the difference between the highest and lowest rating each politician gave, is 3 on an 11-point (un)favourability scale.
5. As a robustness check, we ran both a crossed-effects regression with random effects on the level of politicians and news outlets, and a regression with eight outlet dummies. Both models yield the same findings.
6. *Eén* (public broadcaster), *De Morgen* (newspaper), *De Standaard* (newspaper), are considered as the ‘quality media’; *Het Nieuwsblad* (newspaper), *Gazet van*

Antwerpen (newspaper), *Het Laatste Nieuws* (newspaper), *Belang van Limburg* (newspaper), and *VTM* (commercial broadcaster) were the ‘popular media’ (see De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007).

7. For this dummy variable, we rely on two questions asked in a citizen survey ($N = 1,190$) fielded in July 2019. Citizens were asked to place themselves on a left–right scale and to indicate the news outlet they primarily consume to inform themselves about public affairs. The differences in the ideological positioning of audiences are small but significant: *De Morgen*: left-wing audience (3.5 on a 10-point scale); *De Standaard*, *Eén* and *Belang Van Limburg*: center audience (5.2); *Gazet Van Antwerpen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *VTM* and *Nieuwsblad*: right-wing audience (5.8). The variable political parallelism receives the value of 1 in the stacked dataset if leftist politicians rate *De Morgen*, if center politicians rate one of the outlets that are identified as ‘center’, and so on.

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