



Political balance in the news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings

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Abstract

Balance is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalize. It has typically been investigated by examining the issues raised in elections, as well as the volume and favorability of coverage of political actors. However, even after collecting these measures, it is difficult to determine precisely what would constitute ‘balanced’ coverage. Based on a comprehensive overview of previous research in western democracies, we argue that political balance can be defined according to a political system perspective (where coverage reflects politically defined norms or regulation) or a media routine perspective (where coverage results from journalistic norms). Unless forced to follow norms, western broadcasting seems to comply with a media routine perspective. Empirically, newspaper coverage is sometimes imbalanced according to both perspectives. Finally, we discuss why only a systematic analysis of explanations across time and space makes it possible to determine whether politically ‘imbalanced’ news is the result of partisan bias or not.

Keywords

content analysis, election coverage, partisan media bias, political balance

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Over the last couple of decades, the political balance of the news and the potential biases in the coverage, particularly the so-called partisan media bias that favors one party or politician over the other(s), have been vigorously contested in western democracies. After every election scholars, politicians, journalists and sometimes even ordinary citizens are involved in debates on whether the political news was 'fair and balanced'. In countries such as Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands or the USA there seems to be a never-ending debate about the so-called 'liberal media bias' supposedly caused by left-leaning journalists (Albæk et al., 2010; Alterman, 2003; Van Aelst, 2007; Van Praag and Brants, 2005); in Austria, Germany, Spain and Greece we find frequent debates about political interference with the media, in particular public service broadcasting (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Lengauer, 2006; Semetko and Canel, 1997); and in Italy a lack of balance is also discussed in the light of ownership concentration (Legnante, 2006).

Studying political bias and balance in media content is not only relevant because it has been widely discussed. One is carrying coals to Newcastle when noting that media content is important to study because it can have substantial influence on political knowledge, attitudes and behavior (Sparks, 2010). Given this influence, a better understanding of biases in media content is much needed as an important part of the endeavors to explain attitudes and behavior. However, discussing the state of comparative political communication, Norris (2009: 336) notes two major challenges in studies of bias and balance in media content. First, previous content analyses of media coverage are so different with respect to methodological approaches and replicability that 'each study commonly reinvents the wheel'. Second, what constitutes a partisan bias in the news is often 'in the eye of the beholder', rendering interpretation and comparisons of content analyses difficult.

The discussions in this article reflect that, by far, most of the studies dealing with the attention given to political actors in the news investigate the coverage of election campaigns. Furthermore, most studies on political balance in news coverage originate from the USA and its two-party system in which, superficially at least, determining bias toward one of the parties is fairly easy. In the western world, however, pure two-party systems are a rare exception. Therefore, this article broadens the point of view and includes studies of election news coverage from a wide range of countries, primarily from European political systems. It shows how political balance (versus bias) in the news has been defined, often implicitly, and how media content has been analyzed in these studies. The purpose is to condense the different approaches to defining balance and investigating it in media content and thereby to create a point of reference for future studies. While this cannot cure all the teething problems of media bias studies, the central argument of this article is that only a systematic analysis of competing explanations across time and space makes it possible to determine whether politically 'imbalanced' news is a result of partisan bias.

The advantages for future research are threefold. First, students of political balance in media content will not need to reinvent the wheel and will save time in codebook construction. Second, comparability and replicability will help improve the possibility of comparing results over time and across political contexts. Third, and related to

the previous point, a large and comparable body of empirical evidence across time and political contexts will create substantially more variation in the factors possibly shaping media content (e.g. media ownership, media regulation, government composition). This variation will enable us to obtain a more precise picture of the causal mechanisms leading to bias in media coverage.

In the following section, the historical roots of the discussions on political balance and bias in the news in Europe are discussed, highlighting important differences to the US context. Derived from extant research, we suggest that the conceptual focus of the analysis relies on the concept of ‘balance’ (not bias) and we present two perspectives on political balance in the news as well as key findings with respect to these two perspectives. Subsequently, again based on previous research, the most commonly used operationalizations in the analysis of media content are presented. In the final two sections, the practical differences between – and the empirical results deriving from – the two perspectives on political balance are discussed.

Historical and conceptual foundations

In Europe, unlike the USA, the discussion of political balance in the media is closely linked to the establishing of the electronic broadcasting media (for an overview over the US debate, see Grabe and Bucy, 2009: 190ff.). Historically, the press was (and is) not expected to be politically balanced. Rather, many newspapers were overtly biased and closely linked to specific political parties to the extent that they were paralleling the political system (Seymour-Ure, 1974). Although the press in most western countries may be hardly ‘paralleling’ political parties today (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), newspapers still carry opinion pages where editors often explicitly advocate certain political candidates or parties (Allern, 2007; Jandura and Großmann, 2003).

For at least two reasons, one normative and one commercial, broadcasting is in a different situation. First, starting with the BBC in the UK in the 1920s, several countries established public service broadcasting. One reason for establishing broadcasting, first radio, later television, as a ‘public service’ was a technical one, as only a limited number of stations were able to broadcast. The air waves used for broadcasting were considered a public good, and public broadcasters having a monopoly should, by balancing different opinions in society, serve the entire society and not certain interests only (Lund and Siune, 1977; Starkey, 2007). Even in the USA, where no similar public service broadcasting was established, broadcasters in those days were required to balance news coverage (Cushion and Lewis, 2009; D’Alessio and Allen, 2000).

Second, politically balanced news coverage also makes sense from a commercial point of view. As Van Kempen (2007: 305) notes: ‘With only one or two channels per country, television news programmes mainly applied a catch-all format, aiming at a large audience that was not confined by distinct party-political preferences.’ The same logic applies to news agencies such as British Reuters, German dpa, American AP or French AFP, which have become major news suppliers during the past century. As suppliers to media outlets across the country and even the world, their product has to be usable regardless of the political stances of a specific media outlet and, hence, be fairly balanced

(Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Needless to say, there are cases where opinions sell. In larger media markets, such as the USA, a less balanced approach has proven to be commercially successful. Both conservative news media (e.g. Fox News, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*) and liberal media outlets (e.g. MSNBC; Huffington Post) have grown spectacularly in recent years and re-enlightened the academic debate on selective partisan exposure in the USA (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; for an overview, see Stroud, 2011). However, it seems that a similar trend has remained largely absent across Europe, stressing the 'exceptional case' of the USA.

Over time, reporting in a politically balanced manner has become a central norm for journalists across the (western) world (Donsbach and Klett, 1993: 65; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, the majority of news content studies on actual political balance in media coverage originate from the USA. Here, the common approach is to compare the media coverage received by the Democrats with the coverage received by the Republicans. In their overview of US studies, D'Alessio and Allen (2000: 136) note that in a political system with two dominant parties it is reasonable to assume that both sides receive half of the coverage. Deviations from an equal treatment of both sides are then commonly explained as partisan biases rooted in political opinions held by the individual journalists or by the news organizations (Donsbach, 2004; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2008; Semetko and Canel, 1997).¹

This reasoning is, however, problematic in political systems with more than two political parties – the common case in Europe. Requiring equal amounts of media coverage for each political party would ignore the differences between parties that have different electoral sizes and play different roles within a political system. Allocating equal amounts of media coverage to all parties ignores these differences. Hence, the question is how political balance in news coverage can be defined in countries with complex party systems.

Conceptual definitions and dimensions

As stated in the introduction, the potential partisan bias of election news has not only become a natural part of public discussions, but has also inspired a lively scholarly debate. Using different terms such as 'media bias', 'partisan media bias' and 'political balance', a wide range of studies has tried to measure the extent to which the news favored some political actors over others. However, this scholarly attention has not led to a common understanding of what political balance actually means and what 'unbiased' coverage should look like. Both balance and bias (or imbalance) are complex terms and hard to define, even if we limit the discussion to the coverage of parties and politicians and ignore all other media biases (Fico et al., 2008; Groeling, 2008). Most studies give some notion of how they perceive political balance and/or bias but they rarely discuss the theoretical foundations underlying these definitions. Notwithstanding this lacuna, most studies can be seen as (implicitly) applying definitions based on two different logics: one taking the perspective of the political system and one taking the perspective of the news organizations.² Note that we use the terms balance and bias as antonyms: the absence of balance implies a bias. However, as we

show, this definition does not imply that the bias necessarily should be seen as a 'partisan bias'.

Balance defined by the political system

Definitions of political balance based on the message senders' concerns or normative demands to the media are most often found in studies originating from countries with a two-party or presidential system or with detailed regulation making demands on the media on how to cover politics. First, in political systems with two dominating political actors (parties or candidates), the most common definition of a political balance is 'equal treatment' of these two actors. Such an approach is standard in US studies (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000; Zeldes et al., 2008). It is also commonly found in the study of news coverage in countries with only two viable prime minister candidates such as Germany (Schulz and Zeh, 2003; Wilke and Reinemann, 2006), Israel (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005) or Spain (Semetko and Canel, 1997). An (implicit) criterion of equal treatment is also found in studies aggregating the individual parties into two major political blocs; for example, parliamentary majority versus minority, as studies from Denmark (Albæk et al., 2010), Austria (Pallaver and Pig, 2003) and Italy (Sani and Segatti, 1998) show. Additionally, it has been argued that coverage of parties proportional to their electoral size can be seen as rooted in a political system perspective; that is, as not adhering to usual news criteria (see McQuail, 1992).

Second, in some countries regulation exists that makes specific demands on news coverage, in particular in times of election campaigns and with respect to broadcasting (Albæk et al., 2010; CSA, 2000). Such regulation ranges from unwritten, but nevertheless specific, rules to legislation. In the UK, the public service broadcaster, the BBC, is required to balance news coverage of the political parties according to specific shares allocated to the parties (Semetko, 2003). For larger parties, the shares typically are 5:5:4 for Labour, Conservatives and Liberals (Harrison, 2005; Norris et al., 1999). In France and Italy, a public body monitors the coverage of the (public service) electronic media, during both routine and election periods (Gerstlé, 1991; Hanretty, 2007). The applied benchmarks are rather detailed and vary over time. During elections, the rules depend on the phase of the election but, ultimately, presidential candidates are expected to be treated equally (Darras, 2008).

Balance defined by media routines

In multi-party systems without specific regulation of media content, defining political balance is much more complex. An alternative approach is to use media routines and journalistic news values to judge the political balance of the news; that is, the news is based on criteria of newsworthiness such as focusing on the 'importance' of parties and politicians or devoting more attention to conflictual than consensual debates (Gans, 1979; Hopmann et al., 2011a; McQuail, 1992; Schönbach et al., 2001). If the news does not follow these journalistic criteria one could argue that the news is biased because of partisan or ideological reasons, or conversely because media apply the (in)formal rules

of political balance discussed earlier. According to Semetko (1996: 51), 'To "balance" the news is to diminish the role of news values as the primary basis for story selection.'

A central news value in devoting attention to politicians and parties is their importance or 'political relevance'. This idea that more powerful elite sources are better in setting and framing news coverage goes back to theoretical models such as Bennett's indexing theory (1990) and Entman's cascade model (2004). The issue of political relevance can also be applied at the level of individual politicians. For example, in a study on the coverage of Swiss MPs, Tresch (2009) investigates whether media coverage of politicians is determined by their activities and position within the political system. The political status of a politician largely seems to determine his or her share of media attention (Sellers, 2010; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). Most studies are not so detailed, however. Typically, the operationalization of newsworthiness boils down to either holding specific political offices or parties' standing in the polls. In this vein, Schönbach and Semetko (2000), Schulz and Zeh (2003) and Hopmann et al. (2011a) argue that incumbent politicians are more relevant and therefore more newsworthy. Also, it has been argued that in cases where oppositional parties are likely to overtake government they have a higher news value (Hopmann et al., 2011a). From a party system perspective, such a 'favoring' of newsworthy parties can also be described as a 'structural' bias (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007).

Besides the fact that the media focus on politicians and parties that 'matter', other news values have an influence on how media divide their attention over the political players. One of these is what Sheafer (2001) called charismatic skills. Van Aelst et al. (2008) showed that, in the Belgium election campaign of 2003, candidates with a certain popularity outside politics – such as former journalists, athletes or television personalities – received, relatively speaking, far more attention in the media. In particular, when these charismatic or popular politicians play a leading role in their party they might distort the political balance of news coverage.

Key findings

Previous studies have investigated (1) access to media content (i.e. visibility), (2) the type of coverage received (i.e. favorability), and occasionally (3) the links between partisan actors and issue coverage.³ These three characteristics of media content have been studied for different media outlets – primarily television and newspapers.

First, visibility is probably the most studied aspect of media content in studies on political balance. It is, as noted elsewhere (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000), fairly straightforward to measure. Studies on television news content seem to find, across the board, that incumbents received more media attention, which, accordingly, has been dubbed 'incumbency bonus' or 'Kanzlerbonus'. An incumbency bonus has been found in the Netherlands (Schönbach et al., 2001; Van Praag and Van der Eijk, 1998), in Denmark (Hopmann et al., 2011a), in Austria (Lengauer, 2006), in Belgium (Walgrave and De Swert, 2005) and in Germany (Schönbach and Semetko, 2000; Schönbach et al., 2001), among others. These studies argue that this type of bias toward incumbents has nothing to do with partisan preferences but should be seen as the result of 'media routines'. Even in France,

where strict control of electronic broadcasting is in force, a bonus on dominant parties' candidates was found in presidential elections (see Darras, 2008, although detailed content data are not provided). In the UK, however, both BBC and ITV tend to adhere rather precisely to the above-mentioned proportional coverage (Norris et al., 1999).

Needless to say, in some campaigns exceptions are found. The Austrian FPÖ in the 2002 *Nationalrat* election campaign (Pallaver and Pig, 2003), the New Alliance in the 2007 Danish *Folketing* election campaign (Albæk et al., 2010), the populist-right Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the leader of Dutch Labour, Wouter Bos, in the 2003 election campaign (Van Praag and Brants, 2005), or the leaders of smaller parties in Italy (Legnante, 2008) or Portugal (Salgado, 2009) all received substantially more coverage than expected based on political size or relevance prior to the elections. In most instances, it is argued that this was due to media logic. For example, the Danish New Alliance was founded in direct opposition to another major party (conflict) and the government was expected to become dependent on their mandates (relevance). In a similar vein, it is argued that the charismatic newcomer Pim Fortuyn was able to gain much media attention not only because of his unorthodox style and conflictual rhetoric, but also because of his spectacular rise in the pre-election polls, which increased his political relevance. Although these instances need not be the result of intentional favoring of certain partisan actors, they nevertheless constitute (singular) examples of politically imbalanced news coverage seen from a political system point of view.

An incumbency bonus with respect to visibility appears to be less outspoken in newspaper coverage. In his study on the Irish press, Brandenburg (2005) finds fairly balanced news coverage during the 2002 election campaign. The picture in the 2005 British campaign is more mixed (Brandenburg, 2006), while in Belgium De Swert and Walgrave (2002) find a substantial visibility bonus of incumbents. In their meta-analysis of US studies, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) find no visibility bonus for Republicans or Democrats in newspaper coverage (but a minor bias toward the Democratic party on television).

Second, studies have looked into explicit evaluations and the overall favorability of media coverage towards partisan actors (see also Lengauer et al. in this issue of *Journalism*). Results from television coverage seem somewhat more mixed than is found for visibility. Indications of an overall 'negative' favorability towards politics have been found, which, however, seem to be uncorrelated with their partisan color (Lengauer, 2006; Scholten and Kleinnijenhuis, 1999). Other studies note that evaluations of or the favorability toward specific partisan actors in some instances reflect the course of an election campaign – that is whether a party has momentum (in Denmark: Albæk et al., 2010; in Quebec: Nevitte et al., 2000). In the USA, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) found a minor pro-Democratic bias in television coverage in their meta-analysis. A recent study by Groeling (2008), however, found more outspoken proof of a partisan selection bias on different networks.

In studies of evaluations or favorability in newspaper coverage, the explicitly opinionated editorials published in most newspapers are worthy of special attention. The question is whether there is a spillover effect from the editorials to the news coverage in a newspaper. Studies in Germany (Donsbach et al., 1999; Jandura and Großmann, 2003), the UK (Brandenburg, 2006), Portugal (Salgado, 2010) and the USA (Kahn and Kenney,

2002) give affirmative answers. That is, in the case of newspapers, there seems to be some evidence of news coverage that cannot be explained on a party system or media routine approaches to news coverage and, hence, points to a partisan bias.

Third, issue coverage in relation to political actors has also been studied. The electoral importance of issues for political parties has been mainly shown by agenda-setting studies. Issues that receive more attention in the news will be top of voters' minds when entering the voting booth, and used by voters when evaluating political parties and candidates (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). According to the issue-ownership theory, voters also associate certain issues with certain parties (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). Studies have investigated to what extent the media allow the parties to be covered on those issues the parties emphasize themselves. Investigating the coverage of the 2002 and 2006 Swedish election campaigns, Asp (2003, 2006b) finds no persistent imbalance, but that is not to say that media coverage is always balanced. For example, in 2002 the Folkpartiet was especially successful in being covered in relation to one of its prioritized issues, immigration. In a similar study on the 2007 Danish election campaign, Hopmann et al. (2011b) find that politically more-relevant parties are more successful in being covered on issues they emphasize themselves. Similarly, the British and Irish analyses reported by Brandenburg (2003, 2005) indicate that larger parties have more success with being covered on 'own' issues. Clear deviations from a media routine or a political system approach are found in another study by Brandenburg (2006), dealing with the British press in the 2005 UK general election. There is a clear partisan pattern across different newspapers. In sum, though there are exceptions, a picture emerges showing that television broadcasting in general is shaped by a media routine logic, while in some cases newspaper content shows signs of deviation from both a media routine and a political system balance. Only in these cases can one be more certain of a partisan or ideological bias.

Operationalizations

The most common approach to determine the extent of political balance in news media content is to use content analysis of media coverage (an alternative could be to poll consumers, see Schmitt-Beck, 2003; or to rely on interviews with journalists, see Patterson and Donsbach, 1996; Semetko, 1996). We give a short overview of the applied indicators of visibility, the media's favorability and evaluations, and issue coverage in relation to partisan actors' issue emphasis. We also show against which criteria these indicators have been compared in order to determine whether news content is balanced or not.

Visibility

The least resource demanding approach is to code the party affiliation of actors appearing in news stories (Albæk et al., 2010; Nevitte et al., 2000; Sheaffer and Weimann, 2005). A more demanding approach is to count the exact length of sound- or sight-bites or mentions in single sentences or similar sub-story units in newspapers

(D'Alessio and Allen, 2000; Pallaver and Pig, 2003; Sani and Segatti, 1998). Some studies also include more detailed measures; for example, the order of news stories or mentions; in the case of newspapers, the appearances on the front pages or on photos; and in the case of television, whether a partisan actor is included in a news story by reference, picture or sound-bite (Brandenburg, 2005; Hopmann et al., 2011a; Zeldes et al., 2008).

Visibility measures have been compared to numerous benchmarks to determine the extent of political imbalance. Under the political system primarily, perspective parties, candidates or political blocs are compared on a 1:1 basis or shares given by regulation (Norris et al., 1999). Other approaches include using parties' share of MPs, standing in opinion polls and election results as benchmarks (Albæk et al., 2010; Brandenburg, 2005; Van Praag and Van der Eijk, 1998).

Favorability and evaluations

Measuring evaluations or latent favorability is obviously more complex than measuring visibility. One approach is to code whether the overall impression of a partisan actor given in a news story is positive, negative or balanced/neutral (Hopmann et al., 2011a; Nevitte et al., 2000; Wilke and Reinemann, 2006). A related approach is to code whether the article can be considered as 'favorable' from the perspective of the central actor of the story (Vliegthart et al., 2010). More detailed approaches measure at the sentence or phrase level, although studies differ in whether they include all references to parties in a unit (Brandenburg, 2005; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007) or specific evaluations (Schönbach and Semetko, 2000; Wilke and Reinemann, 2006).

Favorability and evaluation indicators are mostly compared on a 1:1 basis (Albæk et al., 2010; Brandenburg, 2005; Schulz and Zeh, 2006). Explanations referring to a 'media routine' balance (for example, successful campaigns), are rarely used to formulate specific hypotheses about which pattern to expect (Asp, 2003; Hopmann et al., 2011a; Nevitte et al., 2000). Supposedly, the reason is the difficulty of operationalizing or measuring 'journalistic newsworthiness'; for example, defining an (un)successful campaign (but see later).

Issue coverage

Again, we find that some studies code at the news story level (Albæk et al., 2010) while others code sub-units, for example each line of a newspaper article (Brandenburg, 2006). More importantly, a central challenge is how to measure the party agenda. The applied sources are rarely comparable across studies. The party agenda has been coded based on press releases (Brandenburg, 2005, 2006; Hopmann et al., 2011b), election manifestos (Asp, 2003, 2006b) or based on a combination of several channels of party communication (Hopmann et al., 2009). Differences across countries obviously also reflect different traditions (whether specific election manifestos are published or election ads are allowed). Parties' (lack of) success with being covered on preferred issues has been studied by comparing the correlation or congruence of party and media

agendas (Brandenburg, 2005, 2006; Hopmann and Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). Again, parties are typically compared to a 'political system' balance, while a 'media routine' balance is rarely used for hypothesis formulation (but see Brandenburg, 2003; Hopmann et al., 2011b).

Toward conceptual clarity

In the introduction of this article, Norris (2009) was quoted for noting that one major problem in the comparative study of partisan bias is that bias 'is in the eye of the beholder'. By being more explicit about the applied definitions and benchmarks, future studies can, at least partly, alleviate this problem. There are two perspectives on political balance in the news: one based on a party system perspective, another based on a media routine perspective. As is evident from the preceding discussion, in some instances these two perspectives lead to the same expectations as to media content. For example, opinion polls can be seen as a benchmark derived from both a political system perspective and a media routine perspective (but see the following section). Similarly, in the US presidential elections the two major candidates are largely equally relevant from the media and the political perspective.

In other instances, the 'media routine' and 'political system' perspectives are incompatible. For example, news that devotes attention to the most relevant politics and events is rarely balanced (Hofstetter, 1976; McQuail, 1992; Semetko, 1996). In particular, longitudinal analyses of media content emphasize the important differences between the two definitions of political balance in news coverage. As Asp (2006a) notes in his studies on Swedish election campaign coverage, some party is almost always favored in a particular campaign. As mentioned, the Swedish Folkpartiet experienced favorable campaign coverage in the 2002 campaign (clearly in conflict with a political system benchmark). But there are no signs of a partisan bias in the Swedish media by consistently *over time* favoring the Folkpartiet. Rather, the favorable campaign coverage for the Folkpartiet is interpreted as the result of a media routine perspective: the party ran a very 'media-compatible' campaign (Asp, 2003). In Italy, comparison over time covering three elections (1996, 2001, 2006) shows that public channels tend to follow a political system logic, while in private (Berlusconi's) channels a partisan logic highly over-emphasizes the dynamics that would result according to a media routine logic (that is, Berlusconi's newsworthiness, particularly when he is the incumbent) (Legnante, 2006; see also Durante and Knight, 2009). From this discussion it is clear that studying media content at one moment in time only cannot be sufficient to establish firm conclusions on the nature of media content.

In sum, we argue that one only can speak of a partisan bias if news content is not in line with a party system or media routine perspective. The most comprehensive approach is to compare media content against both perspectives. Explicitly linking media content to these definitions is a major step toward formulating common hypotheses and reaching comparable conclusions.

Towards increasing comparability and cumulativity

Compared with the other journalistic concepts discussed in this special issue of *Journalism*, the concept of political balance in the news deals not so much with the measurement of specific variables as, for instance, is the case with hard versus soft news. Rather, the central issue is how to define benchmarks for political balance against which content indicators can be compared. Hence, future studies should be based on precise sets of benchmarks for a media routine and political system perspective. An overview is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Benchmarks for political balances in news content

	News content measures		
	Visibility of actors	Favorability towards and evaluations of actors	Issue coverage
Political system perspective	Share of votes/seats Legislation (if given) Equality (two-party systems)	Neutrality	Congruence between party issue ranking and party visibility on issues
Media routine perspective	Opinion polls Incumbency (including supporting parties) Communication (charismatic) skills Level and attractiveness of campaign activity	Variation in opinion polls (up- and downwards) Communication (charismatic) skills Attractiveness of political campaign activity	Congruence between party issue ranking and party visibility on issues depends on party relevance

Note: For detailed coding instructions on visibility, favorability and issue coverage, see Appendix.

In a political system, perspective benchmarks should be defined explicitly based on the type of political system or on explicit regulation of election coverage. That is, in a parliamentary system the benchmarks are parties' electoral sizes, in a winner-takes-it-all presidential race with two candidates the benchmark is equality. To analyze issue coverage of parties, news coverage is compared to parties' own communication, e.g. press releases. For each party, it can be computed to what extent the overall issue agenda in the media or their own coverage on specific issues correlates with the issue rankings in the party's communication.

In a media routine perspective, indicators of media coverage should be compared to benchmarks of parties' news value at a given point in time, which is clearly less evident. News values can be operationalized with data on standing in opinion polls, government incumbency or press releases, while the attractiveness of a campaign or a candidate is more challenging to operationalize. One approach is using expert surveys. For example, Sheaffer (2001) based his study on politicians' charismatic skills by

surveying people who have experienced the politicians first-hand. Another avenue is to consider the variation in, and between, candidates or political parties in opinion polls. Hence, though opinion polls also measure the size of certain parties or candidates, we consider them as part of a media routine perspective. Polls are mostly ordered by media companies and used to support the horse-race character of their coverage. Therefore, they can hardly be considered as stable benchmarks compatible with a political system perspective. Following the previous discussion, the argument is that news coverage will be more favorable for parties with success in opinion polls in the sense that the news coverage will reflect the parties' momentum by describing a party as being 'successful' or 'popular' while the competitors are 'under pressure' or run an 'unsuccessful' campaign.

Needless to say, it is still important to be clear on the precise measurement. As Norris (2009) noted, the methodological differences across codebooks are often so pronounced that a reasonable comparison of findings across studies is not feasible. One central aspect is whether media content was coded at the news story level or at a more detailed level. To our knowledge, no content study on political balance has explicitly tested whether the exact choice of operationalization of visibility has a decisive impact on the conclusion to be drawn. With respect to favorability, unpublished analyses of the data from the Schulz and Zeh (2006) study indicate that favorability measures and evaluations correlate significantly and positively and, thus, limit the gains of coding both indicators. A specific test by Engesser and Reinemann (2001) reaches the conclusion that general favorability measurements are preferable to measuring explicit evaluations. A suggestion for operationalizations of visibility, favorability and issue coverage is given in the appendix.

Summing up, Wamsley and Pride (1972: 450) were right when, four decades ago, they noted that 'Bias is a slippery concept' which is less useful as an analytical concept. The slipperiness does not prevent it from being widely mentioned, however. This article presents some very first, but important, steps toward curing some of the problems in bias studies diagnosed by Norris (2009). Studies should account for competing explanations for media content, taking into account time and space. Testing the outlined perspectives on political balance against comparable indicators across media types and countries will help achieve the comparability and cumulativity that Norris (2009) rightfully emphasized are missing.

Notes

- 1 In bias research originating from the USA, a third reason is discussed: the political opinions of the media consumers. Compared with most European countries, the US media market is a highly competitive news media market with neither relevant public service broadcasting nor substantial newspaper subsidies. A detailed discussion of the US media market and news bias is beyond the scope of this article. See, for example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006), Hamilton (2004) or Mullainathan and Shleifer (2006), but see also the critical remarks by McManus (2009).
- 2 Note that the following discussion centers on individual media outlets and how to analyze their content, rather than discussing political balance at the media system level (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004).
- 3 Needless to say, the list is not all embracing. For example, some studies also look at visuals or non-verbal communication. See, for example, Grabe and Bucy (2009) or Robinson (1985).

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Appendix. Coding instructions

Coding instructions

Visibility

(1) – (5) Which political actors are present in a news story?

This variable should be coded for the first five actors appearing in a news story. Actors can be individuals (e.g. individual politicians), as well as organizations, groups and institutions (e.g. a political party). The variable has four codes: (1) 'mentioned', (2) 'quoted', (3) 'shown in picture and mentioned or quoted (but not speaking)' (television: image-bites or lip-flaps; newspapers: picture shown; radio: not applicable), (4) 'shown while speaking or interviewed' (television, radio: sound bite; newspapers: interview). Coders should code the highest applicable category (i.e. if an actor is 'mentioned' and 'shown in picture', the code to be chosen is '2'). With these data, the relative share of appearances can be computed for each party (party actor appearances or all actor appearances).

Favorability

(6) – (10) How are the actors present in a news story depicted?

This variable should be coded for each of the first five actors appearing in a news story according to variables (1) – (5). The coding of this variable should be done from the perspective of the individual or organization appearing in the news story. The variable has four codes: (1) favorable (2) 'unfavorable', (3) 'ambivalent', and (4) 'neutral'. Coders should code 'favorable' or 'unfavorable' when the coverage, from the perspective of the individual or organization appearing in the news story, can be assumed to be perceived as favorable and unfavorable, respectively. Coders should code 'ambivalent' when the coverage may be negative but the individual or organization is allowed to respond to the negative coverage. Coders should code 'neutral' when it can be assumed that the actor appearing in the news story would perceive the news story as largely neutral and without any positive or negative denotations or connotations.

Issue

(11) Which issue does a news story cover?

The dominant issue of each news story is coded. An issue codebook can be country specific, but it is important that an identical codebook is used for the analysis of media content and of party communications (e.g. press releases). For a comprehensive list of issues, see the Comparative Agendas Project (<http://www.comparativeagendas.org>).
