

Incumbency Dominance in Letters to the Editor: Field Experimental Evidence

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Research questions and an overview of our results

Is there a filtering bias with respect to the selection of letters to the editor by German newspapers?

- We report the results of a randomized field experiment conducted three weeks before the 2017 federal election in Germany.
 - Four different versions of a letter to the editor were sent to all the German daily newspapers: pro Merkel, contra Merkel, pro Schulz, and contra Schulz.
 - Test for three different types of filtering bias: *political bias*, *negativity bias*, and *incumbency dominance*.
- We find no political bias, and no statistically significant negativity bias.
- We do observe incumbency dominance: letters about the chancellor were 40% more likely to be printed.

Media and media bias

- Free and unbiased media are important prerequisites for democracy, as media inform, set the agenda and influence both voters and politicians.
- The neutrality of the media can be compromised, however, by biases of the media themselves, as well as by the outside interference of actors such as advertisers, lobbyists, domestic or even foreign governments.
- Manifestations of media bias fall into one of two categories: *outright distortion* and *filtering*.
- Filtering—the strategic selection of facts to be reported—is more pervasive than an outright distortion of given facts (Gentzkow et al., 2016, and Puglisi and Snyder, 2016).

Methodological obstacles

- Empirical studies of media bias face the methodological challenge that the researchers cannot observe the population of all possible news items from which the media select what they publish.
- Hard to establish any systematic tendencies or biases in the mapping from all possible news items to actual media content: *Problem of the Unobserved Population* (Groeling, 2013)
- “Perhaps the ultimate way to observe the unobserved population is to actually create it.” (Groeling 2013, p. 145).
- Field experiment with letters to the editor to test for filtering bias.

Our procedure

- We implemented a randomized field experiment in Germany three weeks before the federal election in 2017.
- Four versions: pro/contra chancellor/challenger.
- We sent one randomly drawn version of the letter to each of over 200 German daily newspapers and observed whether the letter was published or rejected.

Hypothesis I: Political bias

Hypothesis I (Political Bias). *Letters “pro Merkel” and “contra Schulz” are significantly more often or less often printed than letters “pro Schulz” and “contra Merkel.”*

- Newspapers are profit-maximizing firms → they might be more in line with the comparatively business friendly Merkel.
- But many journalists in Germany are themselves more politically left (Kepplinger 2011).
- Newspapers might counterbalance their own political position by preferring letters expressing different political opinions (Butler and Schofield 2010), or they might adjust their content to the political opinions of their readers (Gentzkow et al. 2016).

Hypothesis II: Negativity bias

Hypothesis II (Negativity Bias). *Letters “contra Schulz” and “contra Merkel” are more often printed than letters “pro Schulz” and “pro Merkel.”*

- Psychological studies document a *negativity-bias* (Ito et al. 1998; Rozin and Royzman 2001) whereby people pay more attention to bad news than good.
- Newspapers are more likely to cover negative news:
 - Heinz and Swinnen (2015) show that German newspapers report 20 times as much about downsizing than about firms creating new jobs.
 - Niven (2001) and Garz (2014) find a dominance of negative reports on unemployment in the United States and Germany.
 - Baumgartner and Bonafont (2015) document a strong negativity bias in general political coverage: partisan media focus on the opponent's failures instead of the own party's virtues.

Hypothesis III: Incumbency dominance

Hypothesis III (Incumbency Dominance). *Letters “pro Merkel” and “contra Merkel” are more often printed than letters “pro Schulz” and “contra Schulz”.*

- *incumbency dominance*: incumbents obtain more media coverage than their challengers (Green-Pedersen et al. 2017).
- Can be explained by referring to the “universal news value of political power” (van Dalen 2012) according to which incumbents have a higher news value than their competitors due to the political power they wield.
- Can be explained by the “watchdog role of the media” (Green-Pedersen et al. 2017) whereby media make societal problems a subject of discussion and therefore put an emphasis on the responsibility of those that design policy—the incumbents.

Letter that favors the challenger (English translation)

Dear Sir or Madam,

I herewith refer to your news coverage of the local Bundestag election campaign and of Sunday's TV debate.

Let me be forthcoming in saying that I think Schulz is definitely the better candidate for our country and for the region where we live. For precisely this reason I would urgently ask you to stop pretending between the lines as if the election result had already been determined. What if your editorials were to demobilize important voters!

The region where we live is facing immense challenges: an ailing infrastructure, a lack of day-care centers, the integration of refugees. Under a Schulz administration, I as a young mother could be more confident of the future for my children and my home. Hence: Fairplay in news coverage for a high voter turnout!

Yours sincerely,

Annamarie Richter

PS: As we are on vacation from Friday on, I would kindly ask you to inform me via e-mail whether and when you publish the letter to the editor (it is rather difficult to reach me via mobile phone). Thank you!

Related literature

- *Correspondence method* in field experiments in economics: fictitious CVs are sent in order to study discrimination in the labor market (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, Bartos et al. 2016, Bertrand and Duflo 2017).
- Field experiments using the media (Panagopoulos and Green, 2008; Gerber et al., 2009; see Green et al. 2014 and Green et al. 2017 for surveys).
- Experimental literature on the content selection of newspapers (Butler and Schofield 2010, Helfer and Van Aelst 2016).
- Research on letters to the editor (Cooper, Knotts, and Haspel 2009).
- Butler and Schofield (2010) compare whether a letter supporting McCain or Obama was more likely to be published during the 2008 US presidential election.

Implementation and data collection

- Between September 5 and 8 in 2017—in the third week before the general elections—we sent out letters to the editor to over 200 daily German newspapers.
- We referred to the reporting of the TV debate between chancellor Merkel and her challenger Schulz that took place shortly before, on September 3.
- One letter was sent to each newspaper included in the list by the compilation by the Federation of German Newspaper Publishers (stratified on the state level), either via the contact form of the homepage or via e-mail.
- We provided the contact details of a fictitious sender, “Annamarie Richter” with address *Hauptstr. 14*, in or near the city where the newspaper has its headquarters.
- We checked whether the letter was printed by using *Google* and *Bing*, *Nexis* and the *Genios* newspaper databases, calling and e-mailing the newspapers after the election, and browsing through the print issues.

Ethical issues

- Ethical concerns as no informed consent by the experimental subjects.
- These concerns apply similarly to audit and correspondence studies, which represent established and widely accepted methodologies for studying discrimination (see Riach and Rich 2002, Guryan and Charles 2013, Bertrand and Duflo 2017 for surveys). By one count, there are 117 studies from 17 different countries using this approach (Salganik 2017).

Ethical issues

Four conditions are pointed out that jointly justify forgoing informed consent (Riach and Rich 2004, Pager 2007, Salganik 2017):

- (i) any potential harm to subjects is minimal,
- (ii) the study generates socially valuable insights that
- (iii) cannot be achieved with other empirical methods, and
- (iv) the experiment takes place in a context where some forms of deceptions are not unheard of, so that it does not “pollute an already pristine ethical landscape” (Salganik 2017, p. 304).

→ We took care of these points:

- (i) We designed and executed the experiment to ensure minimal harm.
- (ii) Our study contributes scientifically to the debate on media bias, generating socially valuable insights.
- (iii) Any study of media bias faces the unobserved population problem, and creating the population is a unique way to overcome this challenge.
- (iv) Media are rarely perceived as a “pristine landscape.”

General results

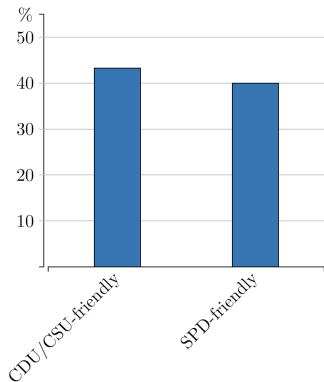
Out of 214 letters in our data set, 89 were printed.

	Sent	Printed	Printed (%)
Version 1 (<i>pro Merkel</i>)	51	24	47%
Version 2 (<i>contra Schulz</i>)	53	21	40%
Version 3 (<i>pro Schulz</i>)	54	16	30%
Version 4 (<i>contra Merkel</i>)	56	28	50%

Table: Overview of the data. Column one gives the number of observations in each treatment. Column two states for each treatment how many letters were printed. Column three gives the share of printed letters in percentages.

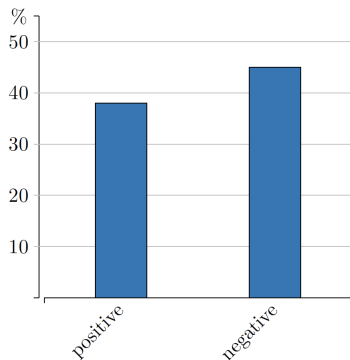
Hypothesis I: Political bias

We do not find a political bias: out of 104 pro-Merkel and contra-Schulz letters 45 were printed, while out of the 110 contra-Merkel or pro-Schulz letters 44 were printed ($p = 0.678$, Fisher's exact test, two-sided).



Hypothesis II: Negativity bias

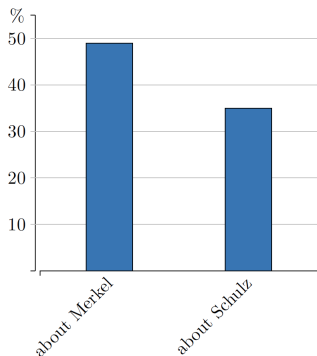
Negatively connotated letters are more likely to be printed, but this effect is not statistically significant ($p=0.190$, one-sided Fisher's exact test).



Hypothesis III: Incumbency dominance

Incumbency dominance is significant ($p = 0.026$, one-sided Fisher's exact test). Out of 107 letters about Merkel, 52 (i.e., 48.6%) were printed, while only 37 out of 107 letters (34.6%) about the challenger were printed.

→ Hence, a letter about Merkel had a $48.6/34.6 - 1 \approx 40.5\%$ higher chance of publication.



Robustness checks

- Regression (linear probability model).
 - Add *circulation* and an indicator for *national newspapers* as covariates.
- Our results are robust.

Additional finding: Newspapers prefer to print letters that oppose their political position

- Newspapers prefer to print letters that oppose their political position (Butler and Schofield, 2008). German press code postulates: *Print letters that oppose the newspaper's own political position.*
- German newspapers do not publish election endorsements → newspaper's political position is less clear for German than for US newspapers.
- We rely on Garz, Sørensen, and Stone (2017) who have ordered a larger number of German newspapers according to their relative political position. party programs.
- Using their left-right scores, we obtain the political position of 46 of the newspapers used in our study.
- Regression shows that for two newspapers that differ by one standard deviation in their left-right score the estimated difference in acceptance rates of left- and right-leaning letters is about 33 percentage points across the two newspapers.

Summary

- This study reports results from a field experiment on letters to the editor in order to test for different implications of media bias.
- We found no political bias among German newspapers with respect to the publication of letters to the editor.
- Negative letters were not statistically significantly more likely to be printed.
- We observed a strong effect of incumbency dominance: incumbents are more likely to win elections, and the effect that the incumbent gets more media attention may contribute to this fact.

Concluding remarks

- The incumbency dominance that we found might be driven by Merkel being the chancellor and Schulz being the challenger, but also by Merkel being female and Schulz being male.
- Our field experiment comprises the widest sample possible, but there are still natural limitations to the interpretation of our results.
- Previous studies of media coverage of politicians, however, have either found that women receive less coverage, or did not to find any significant gender effects (see Vos 2014 for a survey).
- We stay agnostic with respect to the reasons for media bias.
- We have observed that it is relatively easy to place a fictitious letter in a newspaper → relatively easy to affect the press and therefore also public opinion through fake letters that are less balanced in the aggregate.