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## Original Article

# Covering the US presidential election in Western Europe: A cross-national comparison

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**Abstract** Only few studies have investigated media coverage of one and the same election campaign in a cross-national, comparative perspective. This study takes the 2008 US Presidential election as a case and investigates the way it is covered in eight European countries. We explain differences in visibility, tone and framing by considering country characteristics, media features and temporal aspects. Results demonstrate that all three aspects determine campaign coverage to some extent, yet temporal aspects, and in particular the stage of the campaign and polling trends, are of considerable influence.

*Acta Politica* (2010) **45**, 444–467. doi:10.1057/ap.2010.2

**Keywords:** US elections; media coverage; content analysis; cross-national comparison

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## Introduction

The 2008 US Presidential election, held on 4 November, was an unprecedented event. A record number of American citizens turned out, electing the first African-American President of the United States. This historic election and the preceding campaign had also become a transnational event that was intensely followed all over the world. Not only the US media but news outlets across the globe gave ample attention to this election. This article focuses on the campaign coverage of the written press in different European countries. It considers factors explaining over-time, cross-country and inter-media differences in how media covered the US Presidential election campaign.

The coverage of election campaigns in news media is at the focus of numerous investigations in the field of political communication and campaign studies (for an overview see Esser and Pfetsch, 2004). These studies, by and



large, deal with the coverage of national election campaigns in domestic news media (but see Strömbäck *et al.*, 2010). Only a few studies conduct a cross-national comparison of news coverage of the same election. The most noteworthy among these look at the coverage of European Parliamentary elections (Kevin, 2003; De Vreese *et al.*, 2006; Maier and Maier, 2008). Both investigations of national and European election coverage, however, are largely descriptive (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2011). While these provide valuable insights into the nature of election news coverage, it seems that calls for cross-national comparative research, that are frequently heard in the field of election campaign studies (Esser and Pfetsch, 2004), result in either comparisons of the coverage of different national elections (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006) or in discussions on arguably general trends towards cross-national convergence that range under broad terms such as ‘Americanization’ (Swanson, 2004) or ‘modernization’ (Norris, 2002) of election campaigns.

Cross-nationally comparative studies of election campaigns potentially contribute to an understanding of why different media treat the same political event as they do, above and beyond factors related to the media and political system of a country. If we want to extend our knowledge about differences and similarities in election campaign coverage across countries, a systematic comparison of one and the same election campaign therefore offers a unique starting point. By focusing on a single political event we are certain that differences in coverage of different events between different media in different countries cannot be attributed to event-related variation in political system characteristics, such as the party landscape or election regulations, or to the peculiarities of the specific campaign under study. In other words, by keeping several of those politics related independent variables constant we can learn more about the influence of a specific set of additional variables on the coverage of this single political event.

The perceived relevance of the US Presidential election beyond the US domestic political realm makes it an interesting case to study in a cross-national perspective. In this article, we look at newspaper coverage of the election campaign in 17 newspapers in eight countries, during an 11-week period before Election Day, starting in the week of the Democratic Convention (25 August). We focus on four characteristics of news reporting that are commonly researched in election campaign media studies: attention, tone and strategy and horse race framing (De Vreese *et al.*, 2006). This study goes beyond prior investigations by trying to explain variation in these characteristics. We do so by considering time-related, country-related and newspaper-related sources of variation. In this way, we contribute to the general understanding of differences in media coverage of one and the same issue or event.

## Characteristics of Campaign Coverage: The Dependent Variables

Key foci of analyses of election campaign news coverage have been the *amount* of the coverage, the *tone* of the news and prevalent *news frames*. Campaign studies pay attention to the overall amount of news coverage devoted to the elections and the election campaign, and furthermore often take into account the amount of substantial or hard news (Patterson, 2000). In a comparative perspective, focusing on the visibility of coverage offers the opportunity to assess differences in prominence or perceived importance of an event across different outlets and/or countries or over-time.

In the political communication literature, several trends in the content of campaign coverage are identified. The literature suggests the emergence of a 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Brants and van Praag, 2006) in which the content of the news is determined by the media themselves and in which political actors adapt their performance to the needs and formats of the media. Voters are argued to be especially attracted to horse race news and less to substantial coverage (Iyengar *et al*, 2004). Consequentially, issue coverage is decreasing at the expense of coverage of conflict, the polls and the horse race (Patterson, 1994), politicians' motives and strategies (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), and the role of the media in the campaign (for which the phrase 'meta-coverage' has been coined) (Esser and D'Angelo, 2006). It is suggested that news has become increasingly negative and the tone towards politicians more and more critical (Patterson, 1994; Kepplinger, 2000). In a longitudinal perspective, tone is used to empirically assess claims about an increasing negativity and focus on conflict in election campaign coverage over the past decades (Scholten and Kleinnijenhuis, 1999; Esser and Hemmer, 2008). Horse race coverage explicitly relates to an emphasis on who is winning and losing in the campaign and commonly refers to poll results for different parties or candidates (Sigelman and Bullock, 1991). Strategic news emphasizes the strategies, performance, style and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to obtain and remain in a lead position (Jamieson, 1992).

Especially the US case has been flagged as an example of the prominence of game and strategic news reporting at the expense of substantial issues (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar *et al*, 2004). In lieu of longitudinal comparable data cross-nationally, we review a number of single-country studies and find evidence of a similar trend in many democracies albeit at very different levels. In Israel, for example, there has been a relatively stable proportion of issue and game coverage, but a high increase in the coverage of opinion polls, that is, the horse race (Shaefer *et al*, 2008). In Germany, several trends have been observed in election news coverage: Increased personalization, a dominance of the strategy frame and growing negativity (Semetko and Schoenbach, 2003; Esser and Hemmer, 2008). In Britain, there too has been an



increase in the game and strategic aspects of the news coverage and this development coincided with an overall *decrease* in the amount of time that is devoted to elections at the BBC and ITV News (Scammell and Semetko, 2008). In France, scholars concluded that since the early 1980s, the political game aspect constitutes about three-fourths of the political information on television news (Darras, 2008).

In conclusion, several common trends can be identified. Some level of horse race and strategic news coverage has been adapted in most countries. As pointed out above, the fact that this has become more common does not imply that the tendency is unequivocal, and in some cases this development has led to a larger focus on the campaign, polls and strategies whereas in other cases more on candidates and their personalities (Kaid and Strömbäck, 2008). However, due to the single-country design of most studies, a systematic assessment of differences and similarities is hard to achieve. There seems to be an agreement, however, on the characteristics of coverage that are of importance. First, issue coverage is regarded important. Second, the use of strategy and horse race frames is commonly investigated. Third, the visibility of candidates and especially to what extent they are or are not covered in favorable terms is frequently considered. In the next section, we discuss how those features of coverage might differ across countries, newspapers and time. Here, we have to rely mainly on studies that look at national media coverage of an election that takes place in the same country and assume that similar mechanisms apply when coverage of a foreign election is considered.

### **Sources of Variation in Media Coverage: The Independent Variables**

While media coverage of elections is commonly used as an independent variable, explaining for example confirm in individual attitudes or voting behavior, research trying to explain changes and differences in media content is relatively limited (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Cross-national comparative endeavors in this area are even scarcer. This does not mean that scholars have not considered the question why and how certain issues or events make it into the news. The classical news value approach (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), for example, speaks mainly to the first question. Galtung and Ruge (1965) note that all real-world episodes get attributed a news value, based on the presence of certain news factors, indicating the chance of that event making it into the news. In a similar vein, the international news flow literature considers foreign news coverage, mainly in the United States, and focuses on the question why certain countries get more coverage than others (Wu, 2000), but again little is known on how the news about other countries is actually framed, let alone how that differs for one and the same event in different countries.



However, some of the identified news values – for example, cultural closeness – and structural factors that account for differences in visibility – for example, economic power – carry relevance for our study and can be well applied in cross-national comparisons. We will incorporate those in our discussion below.

In their cross-national study on the attention and framing in different newspapers of the 2005 riots that took place in many French cities, Snow *et al* (2007) distinguish three general factors which can account for differences. First, they mention *temporal* aspects, such as temporal proximity to the event. Second, they argue that *country-specific* elements and especially the relations between the country in which the event takes place and the country where it is reported upon matter. Third, newspaper-characteristics might matter in explaining variation in coverage. In this article, we largely follow their distinction and suggest different explanations relating to time, country (context) and outlet that might explain differences in the various elements of coverage we are looking at.

### Temporal aspects

When it comes to temporal aspects, we focus on four variables, for which we expect that they influence coverage similarly in the different countries under investigation. First, we look at the *temporal proximity* to the election. Coverage will not likely be the same throughout the campaign. From the news value approach, we know that the *relevance* of an event influences the amount of coverage (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). If the event approaches, its relevance increases. Therefore, we expect that the visibility of the event is likely to increase when Election Day approaches (Hypothesis 1a). Second, the extensive literature on election campaigns offers little insight in patterns of fluctuations in the content of coverage during the campaign. If comparisons are made, these usually relate to outlet differences by lumping together all coverage in each outlet and see how it differs in for example the use of certain frames. However, there are reasons to expect that frame use also fluctuates systematically across the campaign. We expect this particularly to be the case for the use of the horse race frame. As Election Day approaches, the relevance of opinion polls increases, since they might be a better indication of the actual election result than earlier on in the campaign (see also Domke *et al*, 1997). Therefore, our second hypothesis is: with Election Day approaching, the actual standing in the polls gets more important, resulting in more horse race framing (Hypothesis 1b).

The second temporal aspect we take into account are the actual *poll* results. Media follow those polls closely and pay ample attention to their results (Welch, 2002). If a candidate does better in the polls, it is likely to influence the



coverage about that candidate in such a way that it becomes more favorable towards him. This leads to the expectation that poll standings will especially influence the tone towards the two candidates. Therefore, our hypothesis is: the more favorable the poll standings for a candidate, the more favorable the tone towards the candidate will be (Hypothesis 2).

Third, we focus on real-world events, the *Democratic and Republican Conventions*. These high-profile events, during which the respective candidates are officially nominated as Presidential candidate for their respective party, get extensively covered (Bartels, 1988; Wlezien and Erikson, 2002). Therefore, we expect the visibility of the campaign to be higher during those events (Hypothesis 3a). The Conventions consist to a considerable extent of endorsements of prominent party members for their own candidate and of verbal attacks on the other candidate. As Domke *et al* (1997) demonstrated for the 1992 Presidential campaign, coverage is most favorable for a candidate during its own party's Convention. Consequently, we expect the coverage during the Democratic Convention to be more favorable towards Obama and less favorable towards McCain, while it is more favorable towards McCain and less favorable towards Obama during the Republican convention (Hypothesis 3b). Furthermore, conventions are very much focused on the question how to beat the other candidate, so a stronger reliance on strategy framing is assumed (Hypothesis 3c).

### Country characteristics

With regard to country characteristics, we focus on four variables. Three of them relate to the relationship between the United States and the country in which the coverage takes place. First, we look at trade relations. Here we follow the extensive literature on international news flows. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that the size of trade flows is a good indication of one country's relevance for another one (see also Pietilainen, 2006). If trade flows are larger, media coverage of the country will be more visible. It is plausible that this effect spills over to the election campaign. In his comparative study Rosengren (1974) has shown that foreign trade explained between one-quarter and two-thirds of the variance in the press coverage of elections in other countries.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we expect the level of trade relations to positively affect the visibility of the campaign (Hypothesis 4).

Second, we look specifically at whether or not the country is in the 'war coalition' with the United States, militarily supporting intervention in Iraq. For these countries we expect the United States and the outcomes of the elections to be more relevant and thus the overall visibility of the campaign to be higher (Hypothesis 5).

Third, we look at public opinion towards the United States. Research has shown that public opinion can also affect news coverage (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) and we assume this particularly to be the case in the realm of international politics. We concur with the expectations of Strömbäck and colleagues (2010) who find in their study of the coverage of the 2008 US presidential elections in several countries across the world, that countries with higher and more deeply rooted levels of anti-Americanism have somewhat more negative coverage of Republican candidate John McCain. Looking in particular at the effect of public evaluations in each country of the incumbent US President, we expect that the coverage of the candidate from the incumbent party (that is, John McCain) will be more negative towards that candidate when public support is lower (Hypothesis 6a). Vice versa we expect that the coverage of the candidate of the challenging party (that is, Barack Obama) will be positive when the support for the incumbent is lower (Hypothesis 6b).

Fourth, we look at the *media system* of the country under investigation and follow Hallin and Mancini's (2004) distinction of the liberal, the Nordic/corporatist democratic model and the Mediterranean model. These different media systems are characterized by different historical developments and resulting relationships and power balances between media and politics. While their typology has become increasingly popular in communication science, it is not self-evident how these country-level structural differences translate into differences in coverage. However, it seems that especially the strongly and early commercialized character of newspapers in countries that belong to the Liberal model is of importance. Traditionally, newspapers in those countries are more heavily dependent on revenues from sales and advertisements. As Iyengar *et al* (2004) convincingly demonstrate with respect to news about the 2000 Presidential election campaign, voters are drawn to reports about horse race and strategy and less to those on substantial issues (see for a similar argument Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007). If we indeed assume that newspapers in Liberal countries are aware of what readers want and are to a larger extent guided by those considerations, we would expect more strategy framing (Hypothesis 7a), more horse race framing (Hypothesis 7b) and less issue-oriented coverage (Hypothesis 7c) in those countries.

### **Newspaper characteristics**

Finally, we devote attention to medium characteristics. First, we distinguish between *tabloid* and *broadsheet* newspapers. In her discussion of the coverage of various British elections by a whole range of different national outlets, Semetko (2000) demonstrates that tabloids devote less attention to the election, but if they do they focus more on polls (horse race) and less on



substantial issues. De Vreese *et al* (2006) confirm the higher visibility of campaigns in broadsheet newspapers for the European Parliamentary elections in 2004. Also Norris (2000) argues that tabloid coverage is more focused on horse race and, personalities and less on issues. Consequently, we expect less coverage of the campaign (Hypothesis 8a) in tabloid newspapers. Furthermore, the focus is less likely to be on political issues (Hypothesis 8b), but on horse race framing (Hypothesis 8c).

Second, we look at the *political leaning* of the newspaper. Our expectations about the differences that can be attributed to this variable are rather straightforward. We, in line with Scammell (2005), expect newspapers that are leaning towards the political left to be more favorable towards the Democratic candidate Obama (Hypothesis 9a), while right-leaning newspapers are more favorable towards the Republican candidate McCain (Hypothesis 9b).

## Methods

To empirically test our hypotheses, a systematic content analysis was conducted. This analysis was done at the Department of Communication at the University of Amsterdam. Additionally, a few coders were recruited at the University of Washington, Seattle. A total of 21 coders participated, all of them graduate students. In the selection of newspapers, we were constrained by language capabilities and electronic availability of sources. This meant that we were able to include only three tabloids and for some countries only one newspaper. While this is an important limitation of the sample, our selection of countries, however, assured variance in media systems, in trade relations, and in being part of the *Coalition of the Willing* and therefore allowed testing country-specific characteristics.

Table 1 presents an overview of the countries included in the sample, as well as their scores on the country-level variables. From these countries we selected 17 newspapers that showed considerable variation in political leaning. Three of the newspapers can be classified as tabloid. The newspapers and their classifications are listed in Table 2.

First, we conducted a computer-assisted content analysis, counting for each newspaper the daily number of articles that contained either one or both the candidate names. In total, 6784 articles that mentioned Obama and/or McCain appeared in the 17 newspapers under consideration. Visibility data were weighted for the total number of articles in a newspaper on a random day halfway the research period (October 1).

From this sample, we randomly selected a minimum of one article per day for the period between August 24 and November 4, 2008, which contained one or both names of the candidates. During the periods in which the election

**Table 1:** Countries included in the analysis

<i>Country</i>	<i>Media system</i>	<i>Public support Bush</i>	<i>Trade relations</i>	<i>War coalition</i>
The Netherlands	Northern/Central Europe	17	14.20	Yes
Germany	Northern/Central Europe	20	15.40	No
United Kingdom	Liberal	23	21.20	Yes
France	Mediterranean	13	12.90	No
Belgium	Northern/Central Europe	12	11.40	No
Ireland	Liberal	23	29.90	No
Switzerland	Northern/Central Europe	NA	17.30	No
Spain	Mediterranean	8	7.70	Yes

*Note:* See Appendix B for operationalization. NA = not available.

**Table 2:** Selected newspapers

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Leaning</i>	<i>Tabloid</i>
Volkskrant	the Netherlands	Left	No
Telegraaf	the Netherlands	Right	Yes
NRC	the Netherlands	Middle	No
Frankfurter Rundschau	Germany	Left	No
Tageszeitung	Germany	Left	No
Die Welt	Germany	Right	No
Guardian	United Kingdom	Left	No
Independent	United Kingdom	Middle	No
Sun	United Kingdom	Right	Yes
Le Monde	France	Left	No
Le Figaro	France	Right	No
Standaard	Belgium	Middle	No
Het Laatste Nieuws	Belgium	Right	Yes
Irish Times	Ireland	Middle	No
Tages-Anzeiger	Switzerland	Left	No
El Mundo	Spain	Right	No
El Pais	Spain	Left	No

coverage was substantial higher, namely the two weeks in which the party conventions took place as well as in the last one-and-a-half week before Election Day, we selected at least two articles per day for each newspaper.<sup>2</sup> A total of 1660 articles were coded for tone, horse race framing, strategy framing and the presence of substantial issues. Appendix A contains the relevant items from the code book for each of those characteristic. Mean scores per medium are calculated on a weekly level, making different sample size across weeks unproblematic. Coders were trained extensively. To check



intercoder-reliability coders coded 42 English-language articles. Agreement for the relevant variables was as follows: 85.7 per cent for horse race frame, 81 per cent for strategy framing and 83.4 per cent for issue presence. For the tone variables, on average 79.8 per cent of the codings were within a one-point range on the +2 to -2 scale.

For each newspaper, data were aggregated to a weekly level. This means that we end up with data that have a pooled time series structure, with units of analysis that represent weeks that are nested within newspapers. This resulted in 186 observations (11 weeks  $\times$  17 newspapers = 187 observations minus one, because the last week of *de Standaard* is not coded, due to data availability).

This nested structure requires specific attention to autocorrelation and panel differences (that is, newspapers). The first question that needs to be addressed is whether the series are stationary, that is, whether the mean of each country-level series is unaffected by a change of time origin and thus whether the expected values are the same for all time points. For all our variables, test statistics suggest stationarity, meaning that the series do not have to be differenced. Second, we check whether a fixed effects model, including dummies for all newspapers results in structural differences in levels of explained variance for the various newspapers, which indicates the presence of newspaper-specific heteroscedasticity. The error-structure resulting from the fixed-effects analyses indeed indicates panel-heteroscedasticity for all our dependent variables. Additionally, the data show contemporaneous correlation across panels, meaning that weekly scores correlate across newspapers. The presence of heteroscedasticity and the contemporaneous correlations combined with the structure of our data (moderate  $N$  of newspapers, moderate  $t$  of time points) makes ordinary least squares regression (OLS) with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) with a panel specific AR(1) error structure a viable option (Beck and Katz, 1995). Mathematically, this model can be written down as:

$$y_{i,t} = c + \sum b x_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad \varepsilon_{it} = \rho_i \varepsilon_{i,t-1} + v_{i,t}$$

where  $y_{i,t}$  is the value of newspaper  $i$  on time  $t$  on the dependent variable,  $c$  the constant,  $x_{i,t}$  the value of newspaper  $i$  on time  $t$  on an independent variable,  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  the error term and  $\varepsilon_{i,t-1}$  the value of the error term a week earlier.  $\rho_i$  is the newspaper-specific autoregressive parameter that corrects for autocorrelation in the residuals,  $v_{i,t}$  is the part of the error term that cannot be explained by the previous value of this error term.

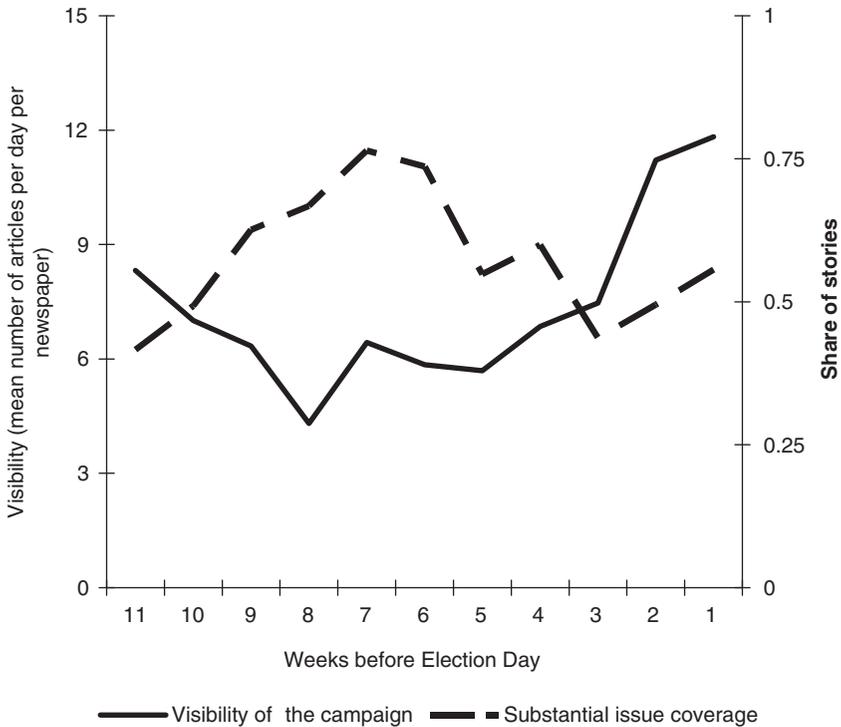
These are our independent variables: proximity to elections, Democratic convention, Republican convention, poll standings, trade, war coalition, public opinion towards US leadership, media system, political leaning newspaper and



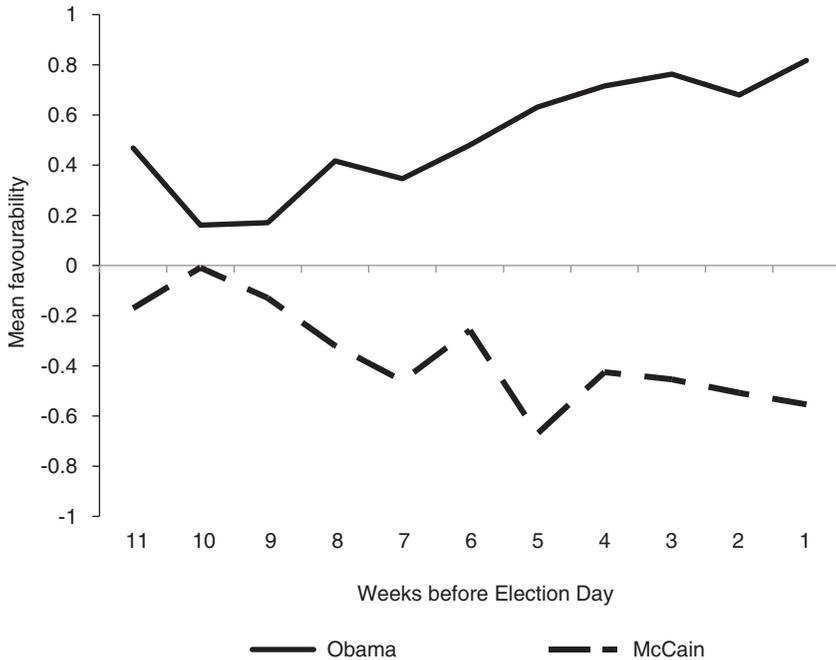
tabloid or broadsheet newspaper. More information on their operationalization can be found in Appendix B. For all our six dependent variables, we present the final model that includes those independent variables for which we hypothesized an effect.

## Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we provide information on the development of our dependent variables during the research period in all studied countries.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays the visibility of the campaign and the amount of substantial issue coverage during the 11 weeks before Election Day. In the first weeks visibility of the campaign did drop, after the extensive coverage of the two party Conventions, before it starts to increase during the last eight weeks of the campaign, reaching its highest point in the final week. By contrast, substantial issue coverage is clearly increasing during the first five weeks of the research



**Figure 1:** Visibility of the US presidential election campaign and of substantive issues in campaign coverage.



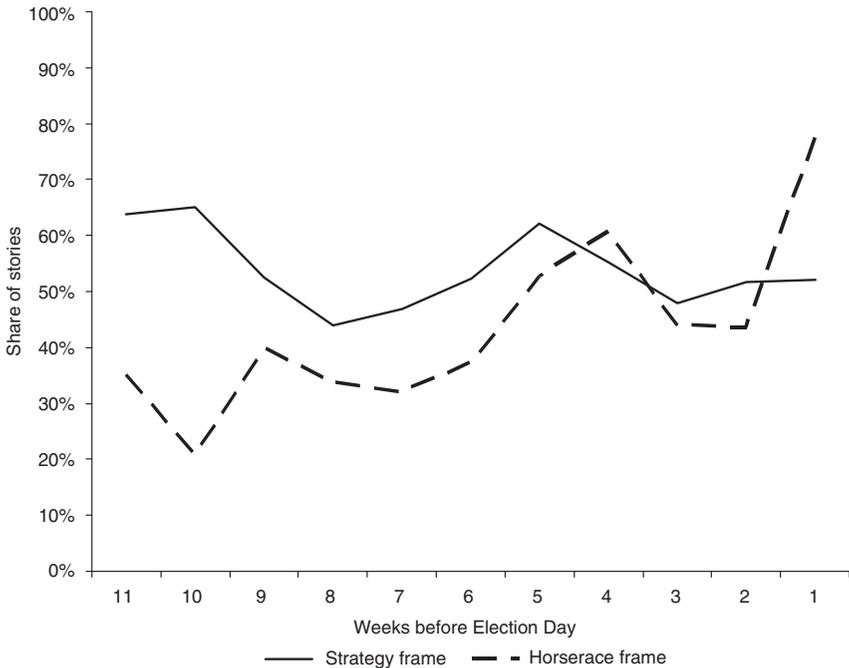
**Figure 2:** Candidate favorability in campaign coverage.

period, before sharply dropping off and the leveling out during the final weeks. Issues apparently were somewhat more important after the conventions, but less so when approaching Election Day.

Figure 2 illustrates trends in candidate favorability in campaign coverage. Overall coverage in Europe was very favorable towards Obama and coverage of McCain never reached an overall positive tone. Whereas in the second week, during the Republican Convention, we see a dip in favorability for Obama and a peak for McCain, the lines clearly diverge up until Election Day.

Last, Figure 3 shows the variation in horse race and strategy framing. Both frames were dominantly used in campaign coverage, with in any week between 43 and 65 per cent of the articles using a strategy frame, and between 20 and almost 80 per cent relying on horse race framing. The share of strategy framing remains rather constant throughout the period, however, showing a slight decrease towards Election Day. By sharp contrast, we see a steep incline in horse race framing in particular from six weeks before the election. In the final week, four out of five articles made reference to opinion polls.

We now move to the explanatory analyses. Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses for each of our six dependent variables. In our discussion,



**Figure 3:** Horse race and strategy framing in campaign coverage.

we follow the ordering of the hypotheses as presented in the theoretical section and first focus on temporal effects. Our two expectations (Hypotheses 1a and 1b) regarding changes that can be attributed to the proximity of Election Day are confirmed. Both the overall visibility of the campaign, as well as the use of the horse race frame increase significantly throughout the campaign. Each week closer to the election results in 0.8 (weighted) articles extra per day and 3.7 per cent more articles that use the horse race frame.

Also Hypothesis 2 is largely confirmed: we find that for Obama the polls have a considerable effect: each additional percentage point lead he gains in the polls results in a 0.06 higher score on the favorability scale. For McCain this effect is smaller (only 0.02) and only approaches significance. We find evidence for Hypothesis 3a as well: the campaign is more visible both during the Democratic Convention (on average 4.6 additional articles per day) and the Republican Convention (2.3 additional articles). Hypothesis 3b, however, is only partly confirmed: coverage during the Republican Convention is more favorable for McCain and less favorable for Obama, but in the week of the Democratic Convention we do not find any significant differences compared to the rest of the research period. This means that the more positive coverage



for McCain during the Republican Convention was quit ‘exceptional’ and short-term, where as Obama was able to maintain the more positive coverage of the Democratic Convention throughout the entire campaign. Finally, the data offer support for Hypothesis 3c: both during the Republican and Democratic Conventions the use of the strategy frame is considerably higher than during the rest of the campaign period. Overall, temporal factors account for a considerable amount of variation in campaign coverage and work almost completely as we had expected.

We now look at the country-level explanations. First, we focus on differences in visibility due to country relations. Countries with stronger trade relations with the United States devote more attention to the election campaign. Also countries that participated in the war in Iraq have more media coverage of the campaign (on average almost two articles more). So, Hypotheses 4 and 5 are confirmed. We also find that public opinion towards the United States matters. News in countries where the dissatisfaction with the incumbent Bush administration is highest is more negative towards the incumbent party candidate McCain (albeit not significantly so), but the coverage is significantly more positive for the challenger party candidate Obama. This provides support for Hypothesis 6b. We do not find support for Hypotheses 7a and 7b: we find considerable differences in framing between the different media systems, but not in line with our expectations. Strategy framing (Hypothesis 7a) is especially present in the Mediterranean countries and to a lesser extent in the Nordic/corporatist European countries. When it comes to horse race framing (Hypothesis 7b), again the Mediterranean system stands out having media that most often rely on this frame, while in the North-Central European countries the horse race frame is least prevalent. The varying media systems do not show the expected differences and we have to reject Hypothesis 7b. With regard to substantial issues, we do find that newspapers in the Liberal system have less issue coverage than those in the Mediterranean and Nordic/corporatist European systems. The difference between the Liberal and the Mediterranean system is not significant and thus we only partly confirm Hypothesis 7c.

Finally, we consider differences across newspapers. When it comes to the distinction between tabloid and other newspapers, we confirm Hypothesis 8a: the three tabloids devote less attention to the campaign than the other newspapers. When looking at framing and attention devoted to substantial issues, differences are not significant and we have to reject Hypotheses 8b. In the case of horse race framing, we even find that broadsheet newspapers use this frame more often than tabloid newspapers. We do confirm our expectations regarding differences in tone towards the candidates between newspapers with different political leanings (Hypothesis 9a and 9b). Right-leaning newspapers are more favorable, or rather less unfavorable, towards



McCain – they differ on average 0.09 points on the scale with left-leaning newspapers. Left-leaning newspapers are considerably more favorable towards Obama: they differ on average 0.35 points on a  $-2$  to  $+2$ -scale from right-leaning newspapers (Table 3).

## Conclusion

This study ties in with a long tradition of research on how elections are covered in the news. Extant research led us to investigate and expect some level of, for example, horse race and strategic news coverage (Kaid and Strömbäck, 2008), but to date only very few had investigated how one and the same election was covered in different countries and what the antecedents of similarities and differences in the coverage were. The results presented in this article showed some clear patterns in the media coverage of the same event in different outlets. First and most relevant, temporal aspects proved to be important. Almost all our dependent variables showed significant variation over the period under study. Not only the amount of coverage fluctuated, but also the use of certain frames, the tone of the news and the level of substantial news. The media coverage reflected the dynamic nature of the campaign and the changes in the poll results. These findings have also important consequences for campaign researchers as their selection of the campaign period potentially has a strong effect on their results. This study suggests that results on the coverage of the final campaign weeks can differ substantially from the coverage of earlier parts of the campaign and it thus can make a substantial difference which period is analyzed as representing the campaign.

Besides clear temporal effects we found cross-national differences. We confirmed the findings from research into international news flows that for news visibility, ties between the country in which the event takes place and the country in which the media cover the event are of importance (Wu, 2000). Both trade relations and being part of a military coalition with the United States in Iraq led to more coverage of the US elections, and in the case of the war coalition also to more substantial issue coverage. Moreover, public opinion *vis-à-vis* the incumbent US President also affected the tone of the coverage, with especially challenger Obama receiving more positive coverage in countries where opinion was particularly negative about the Bush Presidency. Different media systems do differ, but differences are not easily interpreted. It might be that a rather crude system-level distinction does not pick up nuanced differences and similarities between countries that translate more clearly into day-to-day coverage. Another reason for those differences might be that in the coverage of foreign events such as the US presidential elections, journalists



**Table 3:** Predicting media content

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	<i>Visibility</i>	<i>Obama favorability</i>	<i>McCain favorability</i>	<i>Strategy frame</i>	<i>Horse race frame</i>	<i>Substantial issues</i>
Week	0.811*** (0.240)	—	—	—	0.0348*** (0.00780)	—
Democratic convention	4.633** (1.760)	0.0729 (0.125)	0.189 (0.131)	0.115* (0.0519)	—	—
Republican convention	2.344 <sup>+</sup> (1.297)	-0.300* (0.119)	0.319** (0.117)	0.172*** (0.0449)	—	—
Tabloid	-6.706*** (0.644)	—	—	—	-0.0364* (0.0168)	-0.0803 (0.0898)
Trade	0.210*** (0.0303)	—	—	—	—	0.00470 (0.0135)
War coalition	1.956** (0.669)	—	—	—	—	0.247*** (0.0678)
Polls	—	0.0615*** (0.0135)	-0.0201 (0.0141)	—	—	—
Newspaper learning	—	-0.0963*** (0.0268)	0.178*** (0.0306)	—	—	—

**Table 3** *continued*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	<i>Visibility</i>	<i>Obama favorability</i>	<i>McCain favorability</i>	<i>Strategy frame</i>	<i>Horse race frame</i>	<i>Substantial issues</i>
Mediterranean	—	—	—	0.214*** (0.0520)	0.0813* (0.0320)	0.297 (0.245)
Northern/Central Europe	—	—	—	0.104** (0.0333)	-0.0867*** (0.0320)	0.355 <sup>+</sup> (0.188)
Public support Bush	—	-0.0179*** (0.00317)	0.00651 (0.00645)	—	—	—
Constant	-0.510 (1.700)	0.569*** (0.0871)	-0.427** (0.136)	0.420*** (0.0338)	0.267*** (0.0503)	0.172 (0.389)
Observations	187	186	186	186	186	186
R <sup>2</sup>	0.597	0.316	0.241	0.554	0.559	0.431

*Note:* Standard errors in parentheses. Estimations from an OLS regression with panel corrected standard errors and a panel specific AR(1) error structure; <sup>+</sup> $P < 0.10$ , \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  (two-tailed tests).



are less constrained by the political context that they operate in when reporting on domestic politics and as a sort of compensation will demonstrate an even larger interest in the competitive elements of the US presidential elections. This might for example explain newspapers in Mediterranean countries employ strategy and horse race framing more than the newspapers in Liberal countries.

Finally, newspapers matter: tabloids cover the campaign less than broadsheets and newspapers are more favorable towards to the candidate that is closest to them in political terms. Besides visibility of the campaign we find little differences between how tabloids and broadsheets covered the US campaign. Broadsheet papers even use the horse race frame slightly more than tabloids do. It might be that tabloids papers used a more personalized, human-interest frame whereas broadsheets cover the election more from a (political) contest perspective. It could also be that findings for domestic elections do simply not confer with those regarding elections in another country. Issues and substance are maybe less relevant even for broadsheet audiences whereas the contest is what makes the foreign race interesting. Further research is needed to clarify this different approach across different newspapers. In that case it would be wise to sample a more equal number of tabloid papers, as well as a more equal number of newspapers per country.

Another interesting question is to what extent the coverage in various Western European countries is comparable with coverage in the United States itself. A study by the Pew Research Center (2008) describes a large-scale content analyses of US outlets. Owing to different methodologies and outlet selection, a systematic comparison is not possible, but the Pew study demonstrates that also the US coverage was more favorable towards Obama than towards McCain, that trends in coverage were comparable with trends in public opinion, and that also here, the horse race frame was employed quite often. Future research might analyze the US and foreign coverage in a similar way and make a more systematic coverage.

Despite some shortcomings, this article offers an interesting insight in the European coverage of a high-profile foreign event. Its descriptive results are interesting in their own right, but also have broader implications and offer a starting point for scholars who want to systematically investigate variation in election coverage. The strong effects of temporal factors across countries and newspapers offer support for the ideas relating to media convergence (Swanson, 2004). When it comes to this particular event, coverage is indeed rather homogeneous. To what extent this is a consequence of the specific characteristics of the 2008 US election campaign, which was exciting and highly visible and for which all kind of information was easily available is an important question that needs to be addressed in future research.



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in the seminar ‘And the next President of the United States is...’ ‘The media and the 2008 Presidential election’ at the Department of Communication, University of Amsterdam, for their help with coding the data. We thank the anonymous reviewers of *Acta Politica* for their useful comments and suggestions.

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## Notes

- 1 Rosengren compared the reports of elections all over the world during the 1960s in a UK, German and Swedish newspaper.
- 2 For some countries we had more coders available and more articles per day were coded.
- 3 Detailed descriptive information per country/newspaper is available from the authors on request.



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## Appendix A

### Operationalization of dependent variables

*Tone* towards both candidates, measured on the article level with scores ranging from +2 (very favorable) to –2 (very unfavorable). Codebook item is as follows:

From the perspective of [Obama/McCain], how favourable would you say that the story is towards him/his campaign?

Presence of *horse race frame*, measured on the article level with two dichotomous items. Each article that scores ‘1’ on at least one of those items gets assigned a ‘1’ on the horse race variable. The codebook items are as follows:

Explicitly (only if the story or somebody in the story says so): Does the story mention poll results (= survey results)?

Explicitly (only if the story or somebody in the story says so): Are one or more actors called (potential) ‘winners’ or ‘losers’ of what is depicted as a competition or game? (e.g., ‘The winner of the day was politician xxx’)

Presence of *strategy frame*, measured on the article level with two dichotomous items. Each article that scores ‘1’ on at least one of those items gets assigned a ‘1’ on the strategy variable. The codebook items are as follows:

Explicitly (only if the story or somebody in the story says so): Does the story mention politicians’ or parties’ strategies for winning elections or issue debates?

Explicitly (only if the story or somebody in the story says so): Does the story mention that an action of a person, group, institution or organization was taken in order to stabilize, consolidate or enhance his/its position, in order to make him/her/it look better in public opinion



or in the political arena? (i.e., a tactic or strategic move with a certain motivation)

Presence of *substantial issues*, coders were offered the opportunity to list up to three substantial issues per article, when one or more issues were listed, the article gets assigned a ‘1’ on the substantial issue variable. Codebook item is as follows:

Is there an issue mentioned in the article (i.e. major substantial (political, social) issue of the story = taking the most space or time—often mentioned in the headline)?

## Appendix B

### Operationalization of independent variables

- *Proximity to elections*: a variable is created that indicates the week number, starting with the value ‘1’ for the first week of the research period and increases with 1 point every week.
- *Democratic convention*: a dummy variable is computed, having a value of ‘1’ for the week the Democratic convention took place and a ‘0’ otherwise.
- *Republican convention*: a dummy variable is computed, having a value of ‘1’ for the week the Republican convention took place and a ‘0’ otherwise.
- *Poll standings*: From the website [www.pollster.com](http://www.pollster.com) all nation-wide conducted polls during the research period are considered. Daily scores for each day are computed by averaging for the surveys that were completed that day the difference in percentage of voters that supported the Democratic candidate and the Republican candidate (positive values indicate more Democratic support). For those days that no polls were conducted, the previous value is imputed. Data are aggregated to a weekly level. Additionally, to be more sure about causality and that we indeed capture the influence from poll standings on newspaper coverage, we lagged the poll variable one week.
- *Trade*: for each country a score is computed, that consists of the sum of the import from the United States as a percentage of the total imports and the export to the United States as a percentage of the total exports.
- *War coalition*: a dummy variable is created, indicating whether a country militarily supported the US intervention in Iraq.
- *Public support US leadership*: derived from the 2008 Gallup World View survey ([www.gallup.com/poll/121991/World-Citizens-Views-Leadership-Pre-Post-Obama.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/121991/World-Citizens-Views-Leadership-Pre-Post-Obama.aspx)), held in the months before the elections, with the



following question wording: ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of the United States of America?’ We use the percentage of people who ‘approve’. The poll was not conducted in Switzerland. In the analysis, we replaced those missing values with the mean value of the other countries’ scores.

- *Media system*: two dummy variables are used indicating whether (1) or not (0) a country belongs to the Mediterranean system and whether (1) or not (0) a country belongs to the Nordic/corporatist European model. The Liberal model is the reference category.
- *Political leaning newspapers*: each newspaper gets assigned a score indicating whether it can be considered left-leaning (-1), middle (0) or right-leaning (1) (see Table 1).
- *Tabloid*: a dummy variable is created, indicating whether a newspaper can be considered a tabloid (1) or not (0).