

Cross-National Patterns in Political Bias in European News Media

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Abstract

Normative theories of the role of news media in a democracy emphasize the need for the diversity and balance of political viewpoints that are expressed in news media. Positive theories of media, however, stress several possible sources of systematic political bias in media that can lead to the overrepresentation of (a) pro-business; (b) pro-governmental; (c) socially liberal; (d) centrist; (e) pro-EU; or (f) anti-immigrant and tough-on-crime views in the media. Our paper proposes new measures and introduces new data in the comparative empirical investigation of political bias in news media, provides descriptive information for most European societies about the presence, intensity and direction of bias in the news media as a whole as well as in 289 individual media outlets. We test whether there are cross-nationally prevalent patterns in the direction of bias, and whether public service and commercial media differ in the direction of the typical bias.

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Introduction

Political information is inherently partial, framed, disputable and contested. Democratic societies inevitably develop norms regarding how news media should deal with this inescapable fact in order to allow citizens and their representatives to make informed claims and choices that can reasonably express their underlying preferences in the political process. Thus, for instance, normative theories of the role of news media emphasize the need for the diversity and balance of political viewpoints that are expressed in news media, and campaign regulations often seek to allocate airtime to parties and candidates in some supposedly equitable manner. We can hardly conceive a democracy to be truly democratic without achieving some success in these undertakings – hence the theoretical and normative importance of our topic.

Democratic societies rely on a host of more or less effective mechanisms (e.g. consumer and capital markets, legal regulation, journalistic norms, civil society watchdogs) to make this success possible. Positive theories of media, however, stress several possible sources of systematic political bias in media that can lead to the overrepresentation of (a) pro-business; (b) pro-governmental; (c) socially liberal; (d) centrist; (e) pro-EU; or (f) anti-immigrant and tough-on-crime views in the media. Since a priori expectations run in contradictory directions, it remains an empirical question if certain political perspectives remain overrepresented in the news media.

Most of the relevant hypotheses claim cross-national validity by deriving one or another supposed substantive political bias from generic traits of the news industry that should be present in most or probably all modern societies. Single-country or single-media studies can tell us a lot about whether and how these causal mechanisms operate. However, comparative investigations are required to see if the supposed results of these mechanisms are indeed present across a wide range of modern societies. In this paper, we try to deal with two obstacles to such investigations. One is methodological and concerns the identification of an empirical benchmark against which such generic tendencies towards substantive bias can be assessed. The second is the dearth of cross-nationally comparable data that would facilitate empirical tests. Accordingly, this paper aims to make multiple contributions.

Conceptually, we introduce a relatively simple, operationally manageable, cross-nationally standardized and applicable, yet empirically sensitive measure of the direction and extent of ‘bias’ in the news media that compares the partisan leaning of national news media outlets to the electorally sanctioned representation of the same partisan leanings in the most recent national election results. While our proposed measures cannot capture all possible kinds of political bias in the media, we argue that they reflect one of the most common understandings of such bias/imbalance in political news media. We do not claim that this understanding is normatively correct, nor we try to elaborate on possible problems with its normative justification and

practicality. Instead, we merely find it a useful empirical benchmark in assessing what political perspectives may get a stronger representation in news media than in election outcomes. Discussing whether that happens for right or wrong reasons falls outside of the scope of our contribution.

Our empirical contribution, in turn, is a novel combination of two publicly available comparative datasets. Via this tool, we provide relatively rich and highly standardized descriptive information on our subject matter for 24 European countries in early 2010. Analytically, at last, we assess some of the most common hypotheses about the partisan direction of bias in news media.

Expectations

It is often argued in both politics and in scholarly works that some (many, most, or even all) news media in modern societies display a systematic political bias, i.e. they give a systematically stronger articulation of certain political perspectives than actors with a democratic legitimacy do (Niven 2002). Whether and when this is a positive or a negative feature of mass media is beyond the scope of our analysis. In fact, we only use the pejorative words ‘bias’ and ‘media tenor’ in referring to this idea (a) in the absence of neutral alternatives and (b) in recognition of the fact that, by definition, such a mismatch can only exist in media as a difference from an independent benchmark. The generic, cross-nationally operational biases are alleged to be (and note that here we can only briefly reference the theory or theories that motivate one and the other expectation):

1. a particular media logic that, in search of advertising revenue and notoriety, prioritizes entertainment value and thus gives a stronger media coverage of, say, crime at the expense of unemployment (see e.g., Iyengar 1991), and/or promotes jingoistic views on immigration;
2. an alternative media logic that, in search of advertising revenue and compliance with generally accepted fairness codes, avoids to give a fair share of coverage to controversial opinions, such as the views of non-centrist political formations (e.g. Hamilton 2004; Kuypers 2002)
3. the socialization and recruitment patterns of media professionals that make them more socially liberal than most other members of society and willy-nilly promote their views via their professional activities (Baron 2006; Kuypers 2002; Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986, Sutter 2001);
4. the direct or indirect influence that incumbent governments can exercise over the operation of news media and leads to a stronger presence and more sympathetic presentation of the incumbents’ views in the news media than in some other legitimate expressions of ‘public opinion’ (Popescu and Toka 2002, 2010);
5. the specific economic interests of the private corporations that either own a large section of mainstream news media in the contemporary world, or provide a large chunk of the advertising revenue that makes the news industry thrive. It is often argued that these actors have leverage over media content that they use to promote pro-business views

arguing, e.g., for lower taxes, and less obstacles to the cross-national mobility of capital, labor, products and services (there are several lines of argument leading to the idea of a systematic pro-business bias both in terms of values and specific interests, from Gerbner and his team's analyses on the cumulative effects of commercialism on attitudes and opinions, to more radical views such as those of Herman and Chomsky 1988, Bagdikian 2004 or similarly the Glasgow Media Group; for reviews see Street 2011 and Curran and Seaton 2011)

Admittedly, there may be some cross-national variation in how strongly felt the presence of one or another of these factors can be at particular points in time and space, or in different media outlets. Such variation in media colors would be expected to stem from variance in the dependence on particular types of advertisers for revenue; the recruitment patterns and social conditions of media professionals; the formal and informal leverage of governments over public and private media; ownership patterns in the news industry; or in historically evolved and largely idiosyncratic political linkages between the owners of media outlets and various political forces in a country. Since we do not have usable data on these sources of variation that could be readily incorporated in our present analysis, we do not elaborate further on these possible sources of cross-national and cross-media variation. We merely reckon that if any one of the above theories were correct, then there must be some observable cross-national trends in 'media bias'.

Concepts in the analysis

What we mean by such a cross-national trend is that some of the variation in how *the political color of individual media outlets* differ from some empirically observable democratic benchmark remains observable when we pool data about individual media outlets across a large number of countries. Suppose, for instance, that the economic interests of multinational corporations, via their influence on media content as owners and advertisers, indeed introduce a pro-business bias in news media. Then a cross-EU average, for instance, must show that individual media outlets, weighted by their audience size, are more supportive of low tax, deregulation, and pro-EU integration political agendas than we may expect on the basis of a democratic benchmark. We will call this democratic benchmark the '*Electoral sanctioning public opinion*'. The cross-national trend that remains in the political leanings of individual media outlets after we control for any possible cross-national similarity of this electorally sanctioned public opinion will be called below '*Cross-national media tenor*'.

Obviously, we do not expect that these two factors fully account for all the observable variation in the political color of individual media outlets. We reckon that it is inevitable (and entirely laudable) that there is some variation of political leanings across media outlets within any democratic country. The media systems literature often refers to this factor as '*External diversity*' and we shall retain the same expression throughout this paper to denote whatever

distinguishes the political colors of, say, *Le Monde*, from the audience-weighted average of all leading national newspapers providing substantial political coverage in France.

Last but not least, there may be some variance in the political leanings of individual media outlets that varies across countries but less so within the same country. For instance, national newspapers in the UK may, by and large, be more right-wing than Spanish national newspapers even when we account for any difference that may be in the electorally sanctioned public opinion between these two countries. Such country-specific components in the political color of individual media outlets will be referred to below as ‘*National media tenor*’.

The next section discusses our cross-nationally comparable empirical measures for *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* and the *Political color of individual media outlets*. The latter will be the ultimate explanandum in our analyses and we will use variance analysis - a regression-like statistical technique – to partition it into the components discussed above. At the level of concepts, it is important to notice though that *Electorally sanctioned public opinion*, *Cross-national media tenor*, *National media tenor* and *External diversity* are not meant to be independent variables in a system of causation in this paper.¹ Instead, they are the four mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive components of the total variation in the *Political color of individual media outlets*. We develop the latter separately for 17 different political issue dimensions that cover traditional left-right issues, social liberalism, immigration, and European integration. The ultimate empirical and analytical aim of our paper is to determine the relative size, the statistical significance, and – for *Cross-national media tenor* – the substantive political direction of these components on each of the issue dimensions.

Data and measures

As we saw above, the answer to the question of what and how much ‘bias’ occurs in how the media depict the political world is inseparable from the empirical benchmark that, inevitably on some normative basis, is adopted to judge whether media content is how it should be. Note that for the kind of questions that we raised about media content above, the relevant issue is not whether different political actors receive their fair share of media coverage, and whether governments should get two bites of that cherry or not. Rather, our questions concern the substantive policy preferences that, implicitly or explicitly, are put in more and less favorable lights in different media. Are the media exaggeratedly pro-business? Or far too liberal? Or much too jingoistic about immigration? Do they enthuse too much (or too little) about the EU? We would still be hard pressed to point at any empirical benchmark that we could use to answer these questions about media content even if we had conducted a media content analysis on some

¹ *Government opinion*, which we will introduce a little later on to account for something that may be part of either *Cross-national media tenor* (to the extent that national governments have similar political colors) or *National media tenor* (to the extent that national governments have different political colors) is a different matter; one can easily conceive that as a causally prior variable to media opinion.

unprecedented scale, and coded the policy positions appearing there with as sophisticated tools as any party or policy scholar have so far invented to code the content of election manifestos and other policy documents. It is also hard to make comparisons between media content analysis data and public opinion polls, but it is not even obvious whether it makes any normative sense to expect the valence of media content to match mere statistical aggregations of privately held - and for most of the time necessarily uninformed - preferences of citizens at large. After all, the media are, among other things, supposed to inform these citizens about things that the latter do not yet know, and help them rethink their views.

We would like to propose that probably the only democratic benchmark to assess media content is provided by the publicly held opinions of the political parties. Do the media disproportionately endorse views that receive little support in democratic elections, or does it provide a similar diversity of policy views that turned into an electorally sanctioned public opinion on the issues when the votes for the different ideologies were last counted in a national election? We would certainly not want to endorse a strict reading of the norm formulated by this question: there are many good reasons why the media should be free and even encouraged to defy it even within the underlying logic of the same proposition. For instance, election results may not reflect well the public's views on policies in the first place; the public, the media, as well as the politicians may quite legitimately change their views about policies between elections as better ideas or new information surface; and the media should surely not be prevented from airing interesting ideas just because the political parties fail to provide clearly articulated answers to the pressing policy issues that those ideas address. Yet, there seem to be little else in the way of sensible democratic benchmarks in evaluating the distribution of policy views promoted in the media than to ask if it is vastly different ideological range of policy options that we find endorsed in the media than what the electorate endorsed in the last elections.

This conceptualization of *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* and the *Political color of individual media outlets* leads to the particular operationalization of these variables that we adopt in this paper. First, we need data about what policy preferences were, in a very populist sense, “endorsed” in the last elections and in what ratio? I.e., what policies the different parties stood for and what percentage of the vote each party obtained? Fortunately, the answer to these questions is readily provided in a cross-nationally comparable form by a combination of official election results and the regular expert surveys that various academic teams conduct among party scholar specialists. These surveys ask different experts about different countries. They, given their academic work on parties, can be legitimately expected to provide highly informed judgments about where, let's say, the views of one or another Italian party should be placed on an 11-point scale where 0 means “strongly opposes strong US leadership in world affairs” and 10 means “strongly favors strong US leadership in world affairs”. For reasons of data availability and the match of its country-coverage and fieldwork date with our information source on media outlets, our choice among the various party expert surveys fell on the 2010 University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill expert survey. Since, however, this data set is not yet publicly available, for the preliminary analysis reported in this paper we used the data from the 2006 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill expert survey (see Hooghe et al. 2010). We used the Norwegian Data Archives “European Elections Database” to update the information available in this survey regarding the party’s vote shares in the most recent national elections, so that the latter reflects the results of the last national election before January 2010, when the survey providing our information about media outlets hit the field.

Figure 1 about here

As an illustration of what kind of raw data was provided by this source and how we transformed it to derive a measure of *Electorally sanctioned public opinion*, consider Figure 1. Here we display both the raw data and our estimate of the *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* for a Chapel Hill question on ‘economic left-right positions’ for Sweden. The first seven panels of the chart show the percentage distribution of expert responses regarding the position of all seven relevant parties in Sweden on this issue. For example, most respondents (over 40 percent) placed the social democratic SAP at point 3 of the 0-10 scale, and a similarly large plurality placed the conservative Moderates at point 8. Naturally, some other respondents had a slightly different reading of either the parties or the questionnaire item, and placed the same parties at slightly different positions. We reckon that this (limited) spread of responses regarding the policies of individual parties faithfully reflect the complexity of political issues and party positions, and retain this variation – rather than discard it by some averaging – throughout our empirical analysis.

The Chapel Hill study provides us with information about party positions on a total of 17 issue dimensions in 24 member states of the European Union (i.e. all of the current members except Cyprus, Luxemburg and Malta). We had to drop Bulgaria from our current analysis because by the time to which our media data refers to, the biggest party in that country was GERB, a new formation that was not covered by the 2006 Chapel Hill study. We still ended up with 24 countries in the analysis nonetheless because Belgium, given that both its media scene and party system are split along linguistic lines, turns into two separate national contexts in the analysis. For the exact wording of each Chapel Hill questionnaire items that we use the reader is referred to the study documentation.² A brief characterization of the content domain of the 17 items is provided in the figures that we provide for cross-item comparisons. Note that the first question – on support/opposition to European integration – was administered with a 1-7 scale, which in our analysis was linearly transformed to the 0-10 range (i.e. 1=0, 2=10/6, 3=20/6, ... 7=10). All 17 items were formulated such that lower figures (response options on the left side of the questionnaire layout) designated what is conventionally understood the more “left-wing”, and

² See Hooghe et al. (2010) and the documentation available with the data via Gary Marks’ webpage at www.unc.edu/.....

higher figures the more “right-wing” ideological positions. Our statistical analysis will exploit this feature of the data.

The last panel of Figure 1 shows our estimate of the *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* for Sweden on the economic left-right dimension. We derived a separate percentage figure for each point of the 0-10 scale by calculating a weighted average of the seven Swedish parties – only these seven because among those covered in the Chapel Hill survey they were the only ones who contested the last national election before January 2010. The weighting of the parties was always done by their national share of the vote in that election.³

For reasons explained above, for the present purposes we could not use media content analysis to characterize policy views in the media even if we had such data. Instead, and in line with our conceptual discussion, we characterize the policy views endorsed in different media with the 2010 European Media Systems Survey of 653 experts of political news media in 33 European countries, including all 24 covered by the Chapel Hill data. This study collected, with an online questionnaire, expert judgments about media characteristics from specialist scholars of political communication and mass media in the respective countries (see Popescu, Santana Pereira and Gosselin 2010 and Popescu 2012 for the full study documentation). The relevant question in this survey asked the respondents to tell about the 289 most important national newspapers and television channels in these countries “Which political party [NAME OF MEDIA] agrees with most often?”

Figure 2 about here

As an illustration of the data, consider Figure 2, which once again shows the responses regarding Sweden. Over 60 percent of the respondents gave no answer regarding each of the Swedish television channels. We interpret this as evidence of relative neutrality in the political coverage of the given outlet, which is indeed what Swedish television channels are usually recognized for. In fact, even the respondents who could see a partisan tendency were quite divided in judging the direction of this tendency on the private channels, naming no less than four different parties for all three. TV3 and Kanal 5 were however seen as rather pro-conservative and TV4 a bit more pro-liberal. The two channels of the public television divided opinion less widely: those who saw any partisan leaning there saw it almost exclusively in the direction of the social democrats, and certainly not in favor of the biggest opposition party, the Moderates. In clear contrast to all television channels, though, most Swedish newspapers were deemed quite partisan by most respondents, with very little uncertainty about the direction of their respective political biases.

³ In countries where citizens have two votes and/or there are two rounds in a national election, we focused on the list votes (if there were any) in the first round of the election. Note that we used electoral information from the last national election before January 2010, rather than the data provided about an election before 2006 as provided in the Chapel Hill data sets.

Figure 3-6 about here

Figures 3 to 6 illustrate that the responses regarding Sweden fit neatly in some cross-national trends. In media systems that Hallin and Mancini (2004) would describe as ‘polarized pluralist’, such as Italy or the remarkably extreme example of Malta, all media outlets are attributed a clear and overwhelmingly obvious party leaning. In countries that they would describe as ‘corporatist’ (like Austria), or a mix of the ‘corporatist’ and ‘liberal’ types (like the UK), only newspapers are attributed such clear partisanship, and television channels are seen as more internally diverse by the respondents. Hence, in spite of the fact that different respondents answered the survey regarding the different countries, the data that they provided appear to have cross-national face validity and corresponds well with conventional wisdom about the media in the respective countries.

For the purposes of the present paper, we converted these data into information that can be compared with the kind of policy preference distributions shown in Figure 1 before. To this effect, we calculated a statistics not so much about the policy views actually aired in a media outlet, but rather about the policy preferences of the parties – as revealed by the Chapel Hill survey – that each media “agrees with most often” in the views of the European Media System Survey respondents. Thus, the policy views endorsed by the *Aftonbladet* daily in Sweden were calculated on any given issue as 88 percent identical to the views of the social democrats (SAP), and 12 percent neutral among the parties, as this was the percentage of experts on Sweden who did not identify a party that *Aftonbladet* “agrees with most often” (see Figure 2). We reckon that this neutral position is identical to the profile of the *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* that we calculated from the Chapel Hill data and election results. That is to say, we calculate the *Political color of individual media outlets* such that the more often a media was said to agree with a party, the greater weight the policy views of that party obtained in determining the political color of the given media on the 17 policy issues that we took from the Chapel Hill survey. Conversely, the more respondents in the media expert survey declined to name such a party with respect to the given outlet, the greater weight was given to the neutral *Electorally sanctioned public opinion* of the country in calculating the political color of the outlet.

Figure 7 shows the resulting distributions for each Swedish media regarding the economic left-right dimension. Naturally, the political colors of media outlets on any given issue are more, sometimes, especially in the case of television channels and Eastern Europe’s largely non-partisan tabloids, much more widely spread than the positions of individual parties. This is less the case with such highly committed newspapers as *Aftonbladet* in Sweden, and, in fact, most of the quality broadsheets in Europe show in our data the kind of moderate spread in their political colors that we can observe in Figure 7 with respect to *Dagens Nyheter* or *Svenska Dagbladet*.

Figure 7 about here

Note that this way of calculating *Political color of individual media outlets* (on any given issue) is consistent with what we said about the inevitability of assessing media bias against some normatively derived benchmark data about democratically legitimated public opinion. Once again, in no way we wish to endorse it as a normative stance that individual media outlets, or even all media in a country combined, should somehow agree with *Electoral sanctioned public opinion* – we merely use this criteria as an empirical benchmark. Our measure is simplistic though and this comes at a price. Most importantly, our estimates about the correlations between the *Political color of individual media outlets* and *Electoral sanctioned public opinion* on any given issue will be arguably inflated due to a certainly disputable but technically inevitable assumption built in our measurement procedure. This assumption is that when experts cannot identify a party that a media “agrees with most often”, then that means that the views appearing in the given media are indeed a random selection from *Electoral sanctioned public opinion*. The assumption is reasonable: if highly informed observers of media outlets cannot see any congruence of views between an outlet and a particular political party, then the policy views in that outlet are unlikely to show great homogeneity and a wide departure from dominant public opinion. Yet, one can easily point at examples suggesting that a media outlet may advocate an identifiable policy position even when we cannot possibly link that position to a party. We think that this possibility alerts to a measurement problem that should be kept in mind while interpreting our present findings. Yet, we do not think that the problem could be amended by using other kinds of – say, content analysis – data: that would simply not allow comparing media content to existing democratic benchmarks. We also do not believe that this measurement error, when properly recognized, annuls the value of the analysis that we report below.

Analysis

We proceed to discussing our results without a mechanic mantra about hypotheses that would be largely superfluous here. We shall return to the evaluation of the theoretical expectations in the literature that we briefly reviewed above only in the conclusions.

The first task of our empirical analysis is to decompose the variance in the *Political color of individual media outlets*. We do this separately for each of 17 issues, first for all 209 media outlets in our 24 national contexts combined (see the results in Figure 8). The dependent variable for a particular issue dimension, such as the economic left-right dimension, is best conceived as all 99 data points (eleven possible issue positions for each of nine media outlets) in Figure 7 for Sweden plus all the 2145 similar data points for the other 23 national contexts. The data in this analysis are not weighted but the similar number of media outlets (8 to 10) covered by the data in each country assures that national contexts are weighted approximately equally irrespectively of population size. Next, we repeat the same 17 variance analyses separately for newspapers, private television channels and public television (see the results in Figures 9-11). In the latter

analyses, we weight media outlets by their audience/readership so that bigger outlets have a greater influence on the results. However, the combined weight of all outlets from any particular national context is set to be equal in all three analyses, i.e. all national contexts have equal impact on the results.

Figures 8 to 11 about here

The independent variables in all these analysis include one covariate, which is *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion for the same issue positions, which varies across countries but remains the same for all outlets within a country as the democratic benchmark of how strongly populated each issue position ‘should be’. As Figures 8 to 11 show, this factor invariably explains the bulk of the variance in how strongly populated issue positions are in individual media outlets. As we noticed before, this is partly a methodological artifact that merely reflects our assumption that all media reflect *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion to the extent that a certain percentage of country experts interviewed by the EMSS survey could not name a party that these media “agree with most often”. This is not an entirely unreasonable assumption, and nor it is the only cause of the strong correlations that we observe between *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion and the *Political color of individual media outlets*. The heterogeneity of the parties that our panels of country experts associate with some media (such as the Swedish television channels or indeed *Dagens Nyheter* in the example shown in Figure 2) also contributes to these massive correlations that explain between 49 and 86 percent of the variance across the 68 variance analyses reported in Figures 8 to 11. Therefore, with some caveats due to the possibility that media may echo policy positions without appearing to agree with any party, we can say this: for much of the time, the average European media outlet reflects the true range of electorally sanctioned public opinion on important issues of partisan politics quite well.

By definition, there are three other sources of variations remaining in the *Political color of individual media outlets* once we took into account cross-country differences in the *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion on an issue. As explained in our section on concepts, the first and for us most interesting of these is *Cross-national media tenor*: i.e. the degree to which some issue positions are more heavily populated in the media in all countries irrespectively of the *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion. Our variance analysis measures this simply as the effect of the numbering of issue positions on the dependent variable. When we look at just newspapers, or all media outlets combined, the effect of *Cross-national media tenor* is so very-very small – and, according to our F-tests, on many issues even statistically insignificant in spite of the large N in the analysis – that the green sections of the bars almost disappear and typically account for a round zero percent of the variance in Figures 8 and 9. The picture slightly changes though when we look at just private television channels, or just at public television channels: they both have a bit of a tendency to echo political parties that occupy the same positions on issues irrespectively of country and after controlling for *Electoral*
sanctioned public opinion. Overall, the tendency

is about equally strong – to be more faithful to the data, we should probably say equally weak – for both public and private television channels, and is statistically significant for virtually all issues that we look at.⁴ The only difference that we notice at this point between the two groups is that for private channels a *Cross-national media tenor* is particularly noticeable on economic issues traditionally dividing left and right in Europe, while for public television channels a *Cross-national media tenor* appears more evenly across the various issue domains. We will return to examining the substantive policy direction of these cross-national trends after completing the interpretation of Figures 8 to 11.

It is certainly striking that *External diversity* (i.e. differences across media outlets within the same country) account for far less of the variance in Figures 10 and 11 than in Figures 8 and 9. Yet this is a trivial consequence of the fact that, in any given country, there are just a few private and usually even fewer public television channels compared to how many newspapers there are, especially when we weight outlets by audience size. For the same reason, *National media tenor* (i.e. cross-country differences in the political color of the average media outlet) appears to be a far more important source of variance in Figures 10 and 11 than in Figures 8 and 9. There is nothing unsurprising in this, except, maybe, that *National media tenor* remains a modest but relevant source of variation even when we look at all media outlets combined, in spite of the fact that most cross-national differences in media colors are already accounted for by the all-mighty *Electoral sanctioned public opinion*. We note though that both these sources remain a statistically significant source of variation in the *Political color of individual media outlets* within all groups of outlets and all issue domains that we look at.

Figures 8 to 11 about here

Our next and probably most audience-titillating task is to examine the direction of *Cross-national media tenor* that we found statistically significant and not entirely negligible in size for private and public television channels taken separately. The simplest way of determining is to calculate the simple difference between the *Political color of individual media outlets* and *Electoral sanctioned public opinion* for the thousands of combinations of outlets and issue positions in our data, and then calculate, for each unique issue position, a cross-national average. Since *Cross-national media tenor* appeared negligible for all media outlets combined, we report the results for the three groups of outlets separately. Again, individual outlets are weighted by their relative audience size within country, but all national contexts are set to have an equal weight in the calculus. Figure 12 displays our findings. Recall that on all 17 issues 0 means the most “left-wing”, and 10 the most “right-wing” opinion. Note that, following earlier conventions in European politics, for EU integration and decentralization, the two issues that fit less

⁴ Using F-tests and a $p < .05$ level of significance, only the “cosmopolitan-nationalist” dimension proves to be an exception, and even that only for private television channels.

unambiguously in the left-right semantics today, support for integration and support for centralization are taken to mean the “right-wing” position.

Figure 12 about here

The striking finding is first of all how different the *Cross-national media tenor* of private and public television channels, and how internally consistent both is across a wide range of issue dimensions. With some exceptions that concern mostly EU integration and decentralization, private television channels, irrespectively of country, appear to be more sympathetic to parties advocating right-wing and especially centre-right policies than *Electoralley sanctioned public opinion* may seem to justify, while public television channels show a similar affinity towards parties associated with centre-left policies. As we noted before, for the private television channels this trend is particularly noticeable on economic issues like deregulation, taxation, redistribution, or the generic economic left-right dimension presented to the respondents in the Chapel Hill survey. We should emphasize though how small all these deviations from the neutral zero point – i.e., an equality between the average of *Political color of individual media outlets* and the cross-national average of *Electoralley sanctioned public opinion* – are: they range from -0.4 to 0.6 while the scale that we talk about here is the same percentage-based scale on which both *Political color of individual media outlets* and *Electoralley sanctioned public opinion* were expressed (see Figures 7 and the last panel of Figure 1, respectively, for our Swedish examples from before). Given that issue positions run from 0 to 10, we would expect an average of 9 percent in each position. Apparently, a tiny little bit of that is explained by *Cross-national media tenor*, which only makes a one-point difference when it is most at work.

The last bit of our analysis speaks to the idea that one kind of media bias that we may expect to observe across a large number of countries is pro-governmental. Table 1 provides our best evidence on this count. Here, we pool observations about our dependent variable across issues, and employ cluster-corrected standard errors in a regression model. This correction takes into account the fact that our observations are mutually dependent on each other due to the fact that for each outlet, the values of the *Political color of individual media outlets* sum up to 100 on each issue because they are percentages. The variable of interest here is *Government opinion*, which was calculated exactly as *Electoralley sanctioned public opinion* before except that this time we calculate the vote share-weighted average of issue positions for the parties in government in late 2009, i.e. the months before the European Media Systems Survey was conducted.

As before, we control for *Electoralley sanctioned public opinion*. Building on the findings regarding how consistent the direction of *Cross-national media tenor* is for all media types across issues (see Figure 12), the regression model also controls for the numbering of issue

positions from 0=leftmost to 10=rightmost, and is estimated separately for the three types of media distinguished before.

The results of the analysis reconfirm some previous impressions. The overwhelming correlate of the political views appearing in the media is *Electorally sanctioned public opinion*, i.e. the kind of policy views that receive support from election results. The influence of this factor dwarfs all others. Nonetheless, Government opinion does appear to have some independent influence on media opinions independently of election results and party positions that make up that giant. The effect is positive as expected – i.e., media lean towards rather than oppose the governmental opinion – and small but, in spite of our adjustment for clustering in the data, appears to be statistically significant and of equal size for both public and private television channels. It is, however, insignificant (and exactly zero) for newspapers. Cross-national media tenor also has a small but statistically significant effect pulling the views appearing in newspapers and on private television channels in a right-wing, and on public television in a left-wing direction.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper, we listed five expectations regarding the substantive policy direction of bias that mass media may systematically display across a large range of modern societies. Our analysis purported to show that one can usefully examine the validity of these propositions by combining cross-national survey data on party positions with similar expert survey data on the partisan bias of media outlets. We do not find any support for the idea that (commercially oriented) media may promote jingoistic views, particularly on immigration. While we do find a bit of a right-wing cross-national media tenor on private television channels, this appears much clearer on economic issues than on immigration or law and order, and hardly at all on the cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism issue dimension. As for the four other expectations, though, the results lend a bit of support to all of them, but only with some caveats that may be more interesting on their own than the qualified support for the propositions themselves.

We find that public and private television channels both show, though very weakly, a cross-national media tenor that is pro-centrist – but only in the sense that the first is leaning towards the centre-left and the second towards the centre-right. Genuinely centrist views, relative to the spread of opinions across parties, do not appear to have a disproportional echo in any type of media.

We find that the cross-national media tenor of public television channel is broadly supportive of moderate socially liberal opinions. That this trend only emerges in public television but not at all in other media may be compatible with the theory underlying the expectations. Journalists' own norms probably have more of an effect on coverage on public television than in other media because of the constraining influence of commercial considerations and owners in private businesses. However, the cross-national media tenor of public television channels supports not

only socially liberal views on non-economic issues but equally strongly – or rather, equally weakly – centre-left views on economic issues. This may raise some question marks about whether the conventional wisdom on a liberal bias in the media was correct about the underlying causal mechanism and its exact consequences.

We do find that public television channels echo the views of government parties a bit more often than we may expect from strictly neutral channels. However, the same trend is equally strongly – or rather, equally weakly – present among private television channels. This finding should prompt more thinking about the exact ways governments may influence media coverage in their favor: direct public control over the organization per se may be less crucial than it is sometimes presumed by defenders of the private ownership of media.

Finally, we find some evidence that the cross-national media tenor of private television channels echoes the views of parties that expose centre-right views on specifically economic issues. Interestingly, though, the same trend, while present, is much weaker across another large part of privately owned media, i.e., the newspapers. We are inclined to speculate that this may be consistent with the theory underlying the expectation: after all, many European newspapers are characterized by a weaker or even non-existent profit-motive and a weaker embeddedness in multinational corporations than private television channels, and hence hypotheses about internationally mobile capitalists may be less relevant to explain their behavior.

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Figure 1

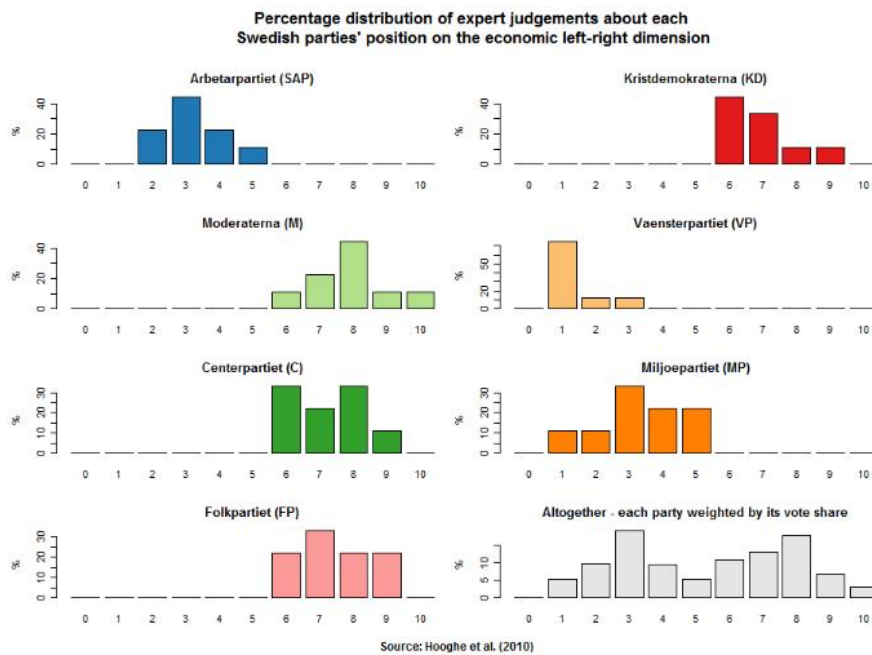


Figure 2

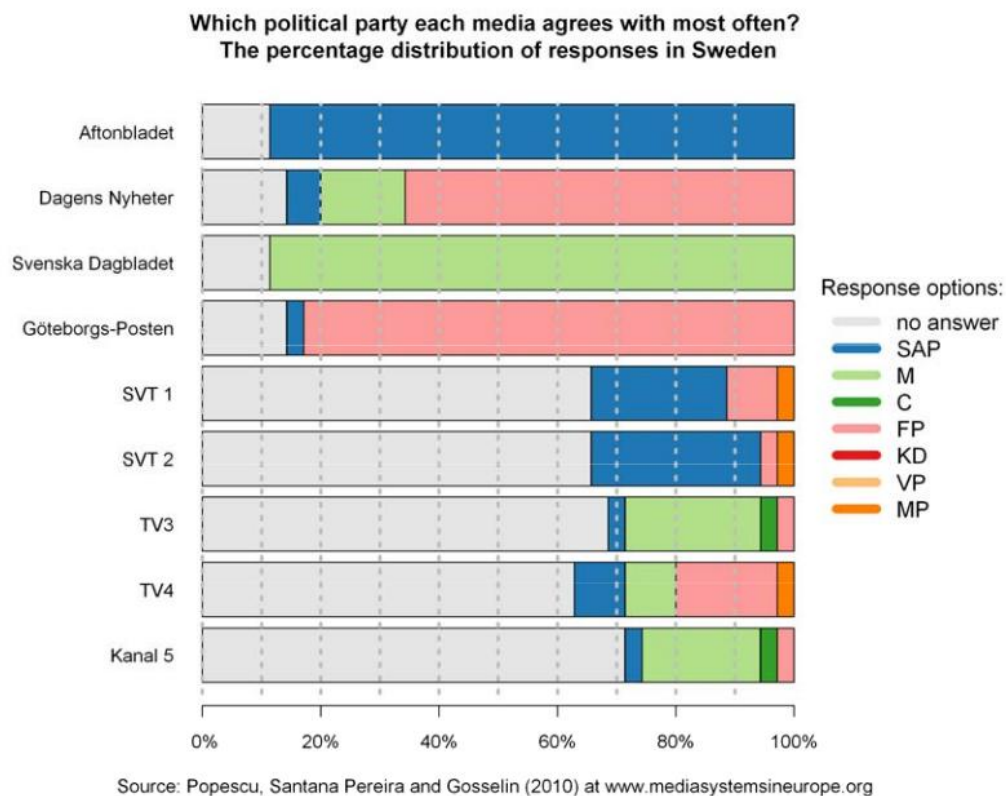
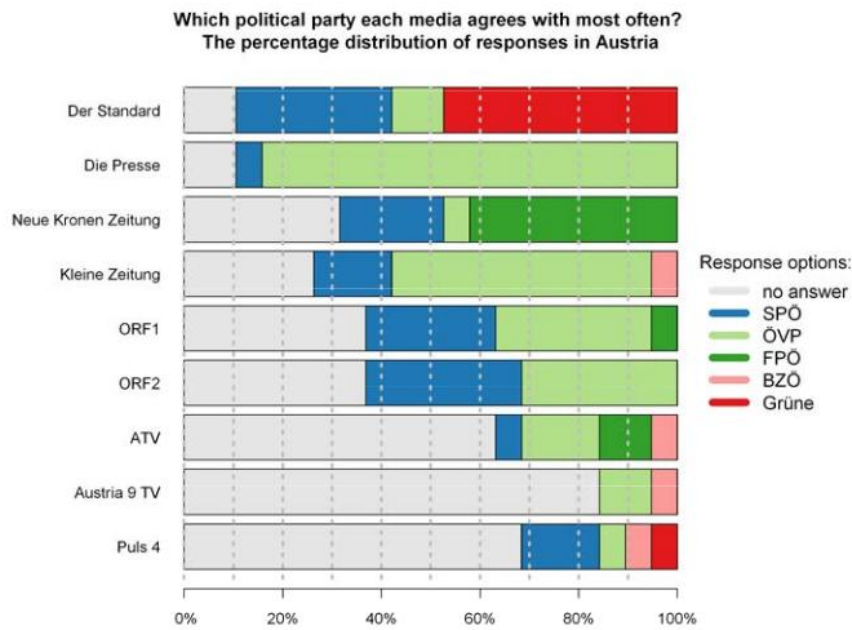
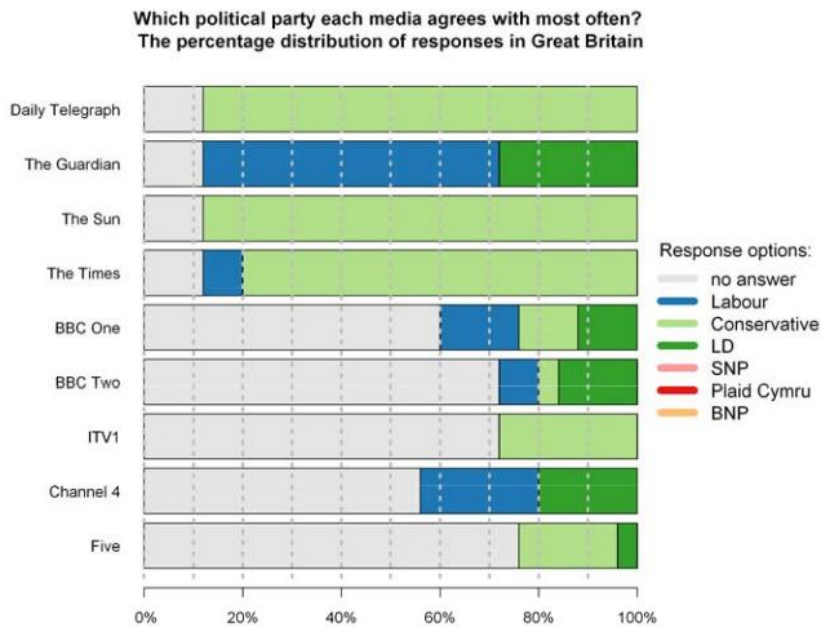


Figure 3



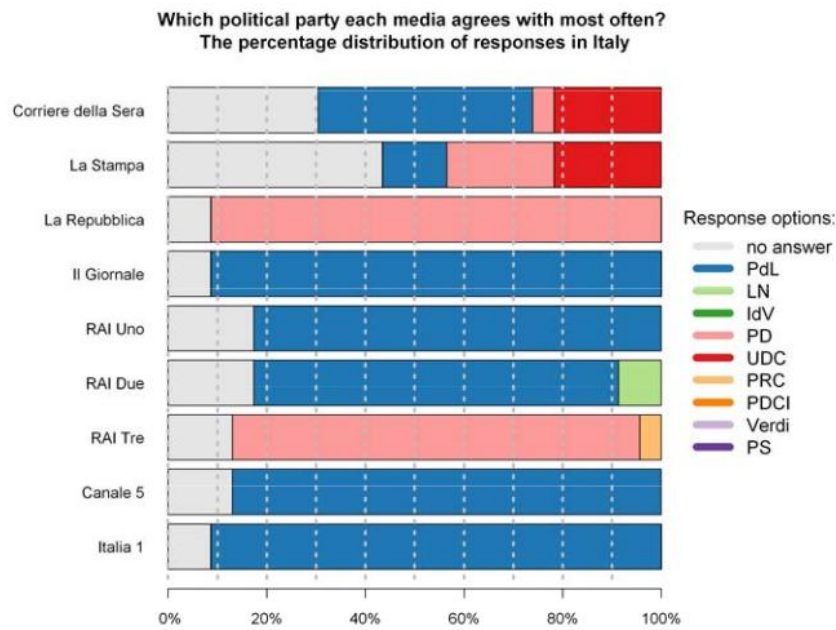
Source: Popescu, Santana Pereira and Gosselin (2010) at www.mediasystemsineurope.org

Figure 4



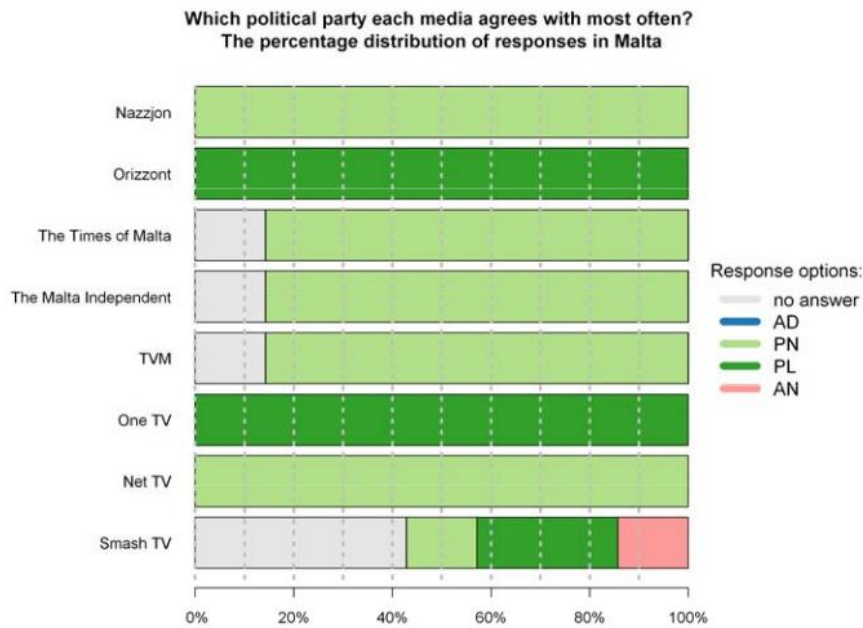
Source: Popescu, Santana Pereira and Gosselin (2010) at www.mediasystemsineurope.org

Figure 5



Source: Popescu, Santana Pereira and Gosselin (2010) at www.mediasystemsineurope.org

Figure 6



Source: Popescu, Santana Pereira and Gosselin (2010) at www.mediasystemsineurope.org

Figure 7

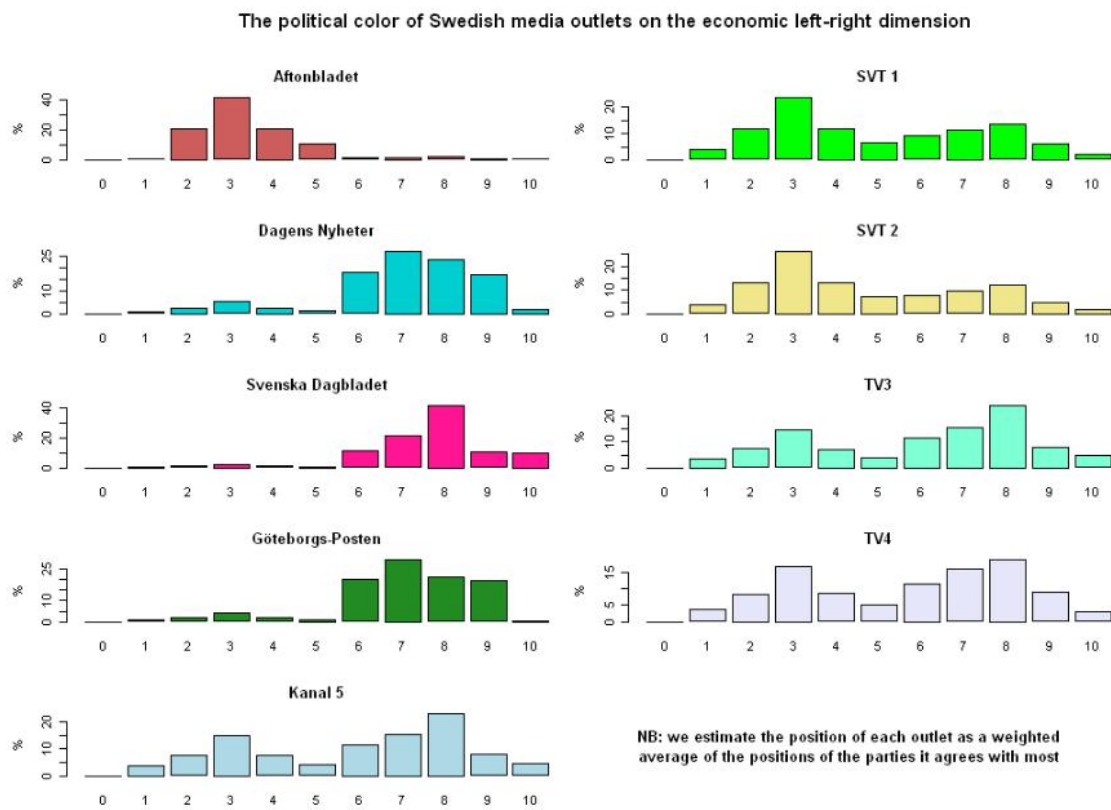


Figure 8

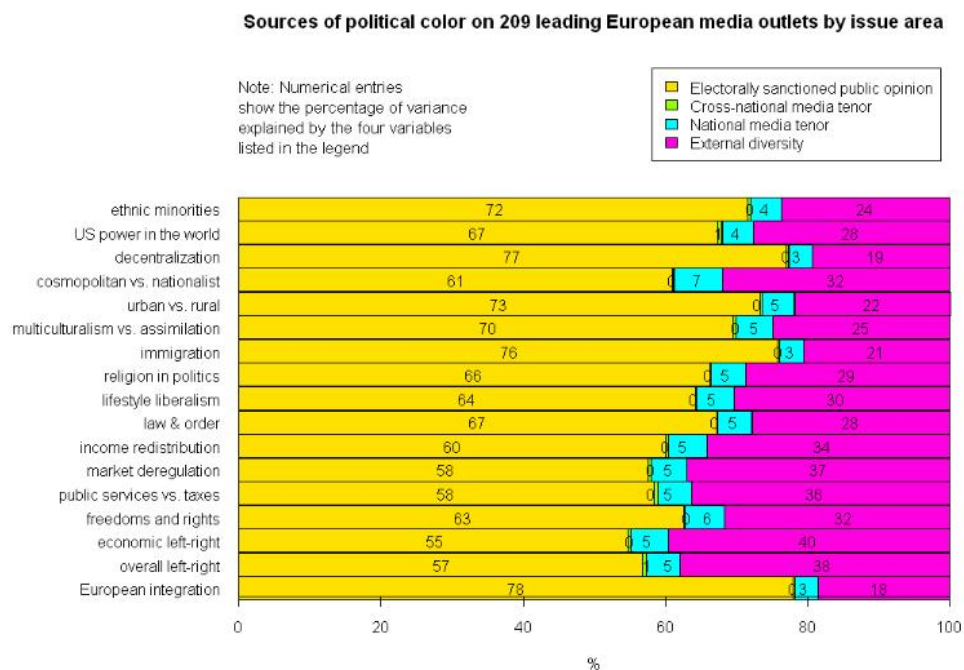


Figure 9

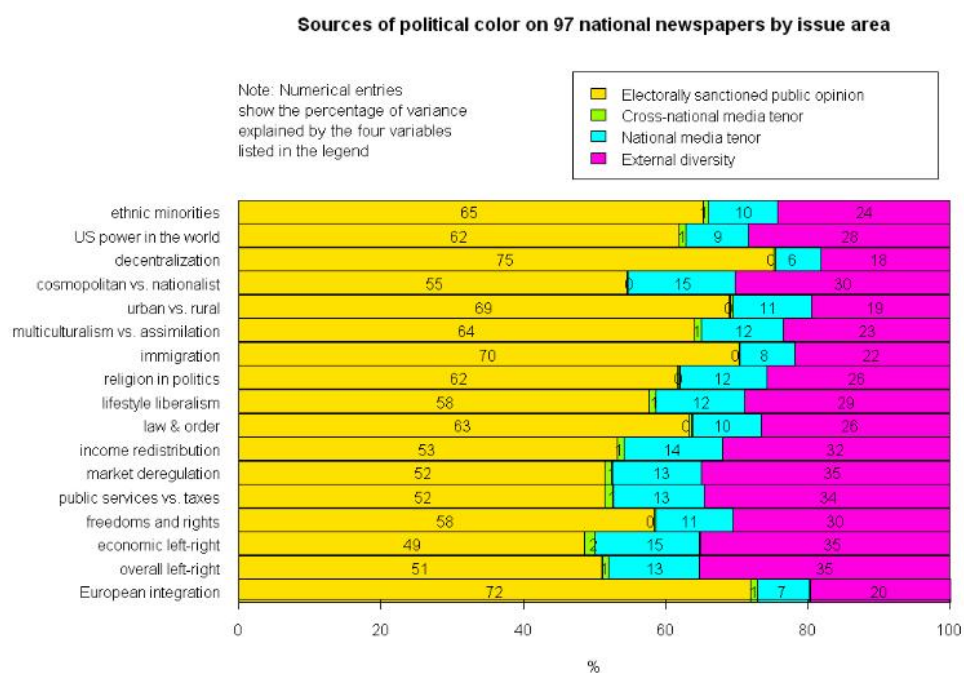


Figure 10

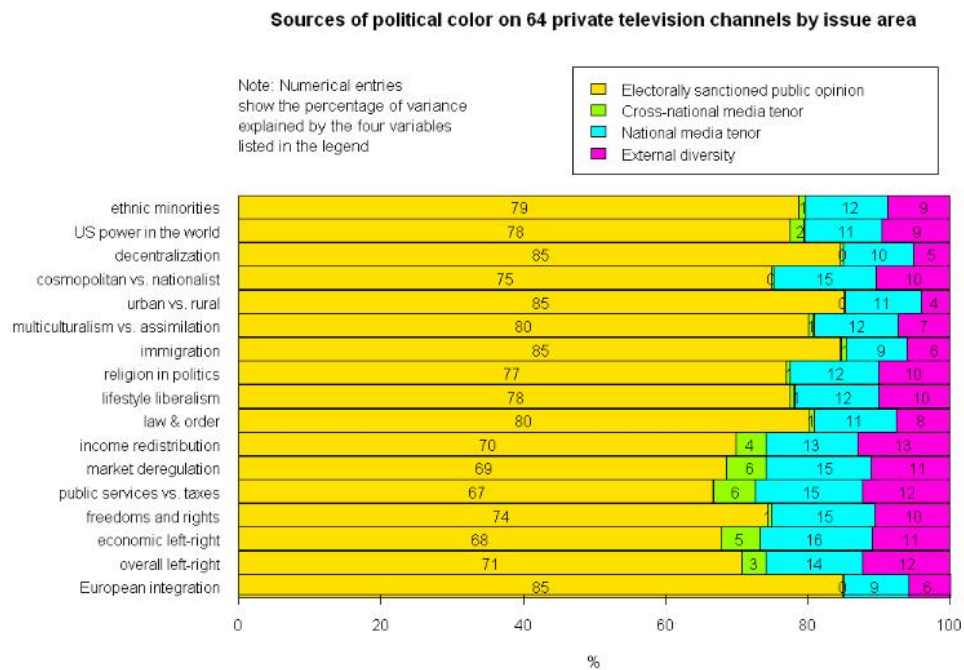


Figure 11

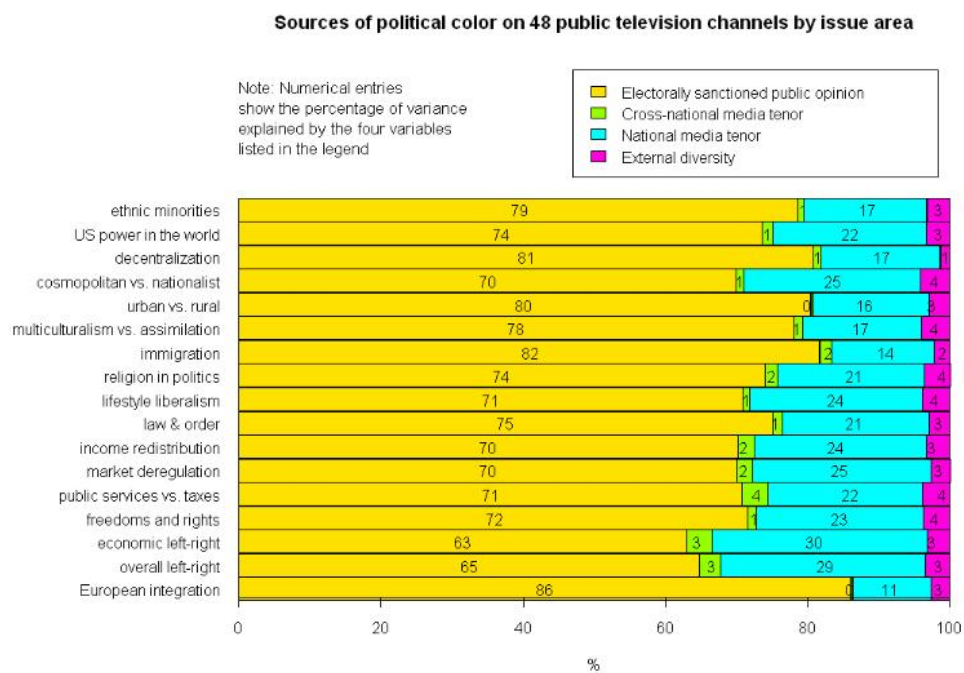


Figure 12

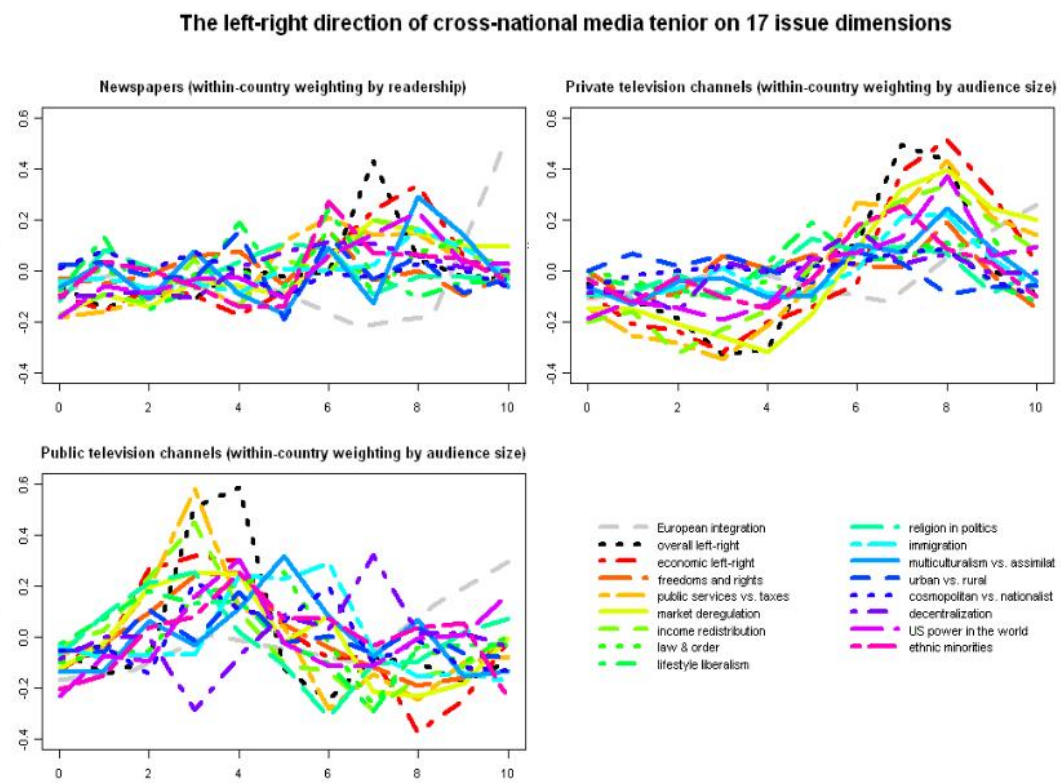


Table 1: Clustered regression analyses of the effect of governmental opinions on media opinion

	<i>B</i>	<i>Cluster-</i> <i>corrected s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>
All 209 outlets in 23 countries (N=37332 nested in 3468 clusters)			
<i>Electorally sanctioned public opinion</i>	0.98	0.02	0.00
<i>Government opinion</i>	0.04	0.01	0.01
<i>Left-Right position on the issue from 0 to 10</i>	0.07	0.02	0.00
Constant	-0.51	0.09	0.00
R-squared	0.67		
Newspapers only (N=16836 nested in 1564 clusters)			
<i>Electorally sanctioned public opinion</i>	1.01	0.03	0.00
<i>Government opinion</i>	0.00	0.03	0.86
<i>Left-Right position on the issue from 0 to 10</i>	0.11	0.03	0.00
Constant	-0.73	0.18	0.00
R-squared	0.62		
Private television only (N=11712 cases nested in 1088 clusters)			
<i>Electorally sanctioned public opinion</i>	0.88	0.02	0.00
<i>Government opinion</i>	0.13	0.02	0.00
<i>Left-Right position on the issue from 0 to 10</i>	0.20	0.02	0.00
Constant	-1.08	0.13	0.00
R-squared	0.79		
Public television only (N=8784 cases nested in 816 clusters)			
<i>Electorally sanctioned public opinion</i>	0.93	0.03	0.00
<i>Government opinion</i>	0.13	0.03	0.00
<i>Left-Right position on the issue from 0 to 10</i>	-0.11	0.03	0.00
Constant	0.02	0.17	0.91
R-squared	0.76		