Incumbency Bonus in Election News Coverage Explained: The Logics of Political Power and the Media Market

David Nicolas Hopmann1, Claes H. de Vreese2, & Erik Albæk1

1 Centre for Journalism, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark, 5230 Odense M, Denmark
2 Department of Communication, Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This article investigates the determinants of the incumbency bonuses in news coverage. Two main factors are identified: the distribution of political power and changes in the media market. To test these assumptions, a content analysis of the news coverage of 5 national election campaigns in Denmark was conducted (4,592 news stories). First, the more unevenly political power is distributed, the more visible the government is. Second, results suggest a trade-off between the incumbency bonus and the coverage of nonsubstantive issues. Third, changes in news coverage seem to be more driven by changes in the political system than by changes in the media market. Finally, it is discussed how future research can further our understanding of political imbalances in news coverage.


In times of renewed focus on the media as a possibly important determinant of political opinions and electoral behavior, the question of political bias and imbalance in news coverage is obviously an important one—though one that is seen differently from different perspectives. Politicians are concerned with political bias because they want to be elected and do not want to be presented to prospective voters in an unfavorable light (Hofstetter, 1976; Schudson, 2003; van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers, 2006; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Journalists, too, are concerned with political bias in the media because “objectivity” is a central norm in defining good journalism virtually everywhere in the Western world (Deuze, 2002; Wien, 2006).

Although voters tend to think that the media is biased against whatever their own opinions happen to be—a phenomenon described as the “hostile media effect” (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985)—they generally see this bias as not having a large effect on themselves. What does concern voters, however, is that they may see
such bias as affecting the political opinions of their fellow citizens, the so-called third-person effect (Perloff, 1999).

These various dimensions of political bias in news coverage provide rich material for research. The phenomenon of bias helps social scientists to understand how politics are covered by journalists and how that coverage might be influenced by, among other things, journalists’ personal political opinions (e.g., Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). These issues are of special concern because political bias in news coverage may be one of the factors explaining election results (e.g., Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999).

In studying media outlets that are purportedly unbiased, two dimensions seem to be especially salient: the distribution of political power, and how the media approaches the coverage of politics. First, with regard to the distribution of political power, the more powerful political position one holds, the more media attention one receives (de Swert & Walgrave, 2002, p. 392), a phenomenon commonly described as the “incumbency bonus,” or (in German) “Kanzlerbonus.” The implication is that each country’s political structure and its internal power distribution have consequences for the attention that different political actors receive: The more unevenly power is distributed between, for example, the government and the opposition, the more unevenly media attention will be divided between those political actors.

Second, with regard to the media’s approach to political coverage, studies in several countries indicate that political journalism itself changes over time. Notably, in television news broadcasting, the increasing commercialization of the media market can lead to infotainment and soft news (Brants & van Praag, 2006; Plasser, 2005). Similarly, the increasing professionalization of politicians has led to the persuasive use of spin, possibly contributing even further to the declining quality of news coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Plasser, 2005; Weaver, 1996). As a reaction to spin, however, journalists have come to focus more on the tactics and strategies applied by politicians, enabling journalists to get behind the spin. Although rarely discussed this way, changes in news reporting might have profound effects on the incumbency bonus in media coverage. On the one hand, to the degree that the media cover those politicians who are the most powerful politicians in relation to substantive (policy) issues, they will focus on incumbent politicians, even in times of election campaigns. On the other hand, to the degree that the media focuses on election campaigns as involving a tactical battle between two or more competitors (politics), the news coverage may ultimately prove to be more balanced (Schulz & Zeh, 2006). In summary, there seems to be a trade-off, in effect, between substantive issue coverage and political balance in the news.

This article analyzes political imbalance in election coverage by television news in relation to these two phenomena: differences or changes in the distribution of political power and trends in the media market. The article presents results from a single country (Denmark), but by comparing and discussing the results with research from other countries, the overall aim is to broaden our understanding of the origins of political imbalance in election news coverage.
Political power and news values

In general, following news value theory, the newsworthiness of a politician’s actions or initiatives is determined by the politician’s power and influence (cf. Brants & van Praag, 2006; Pallaver & Pig, 2003; van Aelst et al., 2006). For example, in her study on Swiss politicians, Tresch (2009, p. 71) observes that “Formal power in the policy-making process therefore easily translates into discursive power in the media, which can further strengthen the political power of an actor and ultimately lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of political influence and media coverage.” In a similar vein, comparing the power hierarchy in Flanders and federal Belgium with the media attention that Flemish politicians receive, de Swert and Walgrave (2002, p. 392) find an almost equal ordering: “Power and media attention therefore are very closely related to one another.” Results across country borders and across time confirm this conclusion.

First, in some countries—for example, Germany and Spain—studies have found an incumbency bonus in terms of visibility in television news coverage during election campaigns; sometimes two or three times as much media attention is given to incumbents (Brettschneider, 2002; Semetko, 1996; Walgrave & de Swert, 2005; Wilke & Reinemann, 2003). In other countries, however—for example, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway—television coverage of campaigning political actors is more balanced (Asp, 2006; Hjelle, 1983; Schoenbach, de Ridder, & Lauf, 2001).

The incumbency bonus is a question not of visibility per se, but also of whether politicians are visible in relation to policy issues or in relation to politics—that is, campaigning or electioneering stories and the like (cf. D’Angelo, Calderone, & Territola, 2005; Esser & D’Angelo, 2006). Studies have found that the opponent is disadvantaged in this respect: In news stories on policy issues, the incumbent is featured more often than the challenger (Schneider, Schönbach, & Semetko, 1999, p. 269; Schulz & Zeh, 2003, 2006).

These results are in accordance with what one would expect based on the basis of the reasoning that political power influences news coverage. Political power is diverted differently across political systems and, therefore, it does not come as a surprise that media attention also is diverted differently. For example, Germany has a political system where the incumbent is in a politically powerful position and is consequently more newsworthy than his or her opponent(s). In contrast, the political system in the Netherlands has, among other differences, many parliamentary parties, spreading and diffusing power among a broader range of comparatively weaker political leaders. Although only a few studies compare election news coverage in different countries, the study by Schoenbach et al. (2001) is suggestive. They found a pronounced incumbency bonus in election news coverage in Germany, but not in the Netherlands: “Certainly Dutch news organizations focus on candidates who head party lists as the key people in an election campaign. But all in all, TV news in the Netherlands seems [unlike the German media] to mirror or to emphasize a more equal distribution of power within the political system” (Schoenbach et al., 2001, p. 528).
In some countries, specific procedures are established to overrule the consequences of news reporting based on news values only (cf. CSA, 2000). An example is the British political system with its unevenly distributed political power. Determined to achieve balance in election coverage, the BBC has pursued efforts that are sometimes “downright absurd”—for example, by “making” news out of obvious propaganda activities by the opposition (Schneider et al., 1999, p. 269; Schönbach & Semetko, 1994, p. 338). Hence, Blumler and Gurevitch (1991) describe election news coverage at the BBC as “sacerdotal” compared to a “pragmatic” approach in which election campaigns are not seen as newsworthy in and of itself. Although British coverage may be less “sacerdotal” now (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001), it is still characterized by efforts to balance election news coverage.

Second, empirical results over time also confirm the reasoning that the media visibility of politicians can be explained by news value theory. As Schulz and Zeh (2006) have shown, the incumbency bonus in German election coverage has been declining over the last 10–15 years and actually disappeared in the 2005 Bundestag elections. In this period, the competitive aspect of the campaign appears to have gained in news value: Although German journalists used to be “mercilessly professional” by mainly focusing on political “relevance” and the incumbent politicians even during election campaigns (Schönbach & Semetko, 1994), the campaign itself seems to have become news. The coverage of policy issues has been declining, whereas the coverage of the personal and strategic components of the campaigns has been increasing (Schulz & Zeh, 2006). As the media increasingly depicts election campaigns as battles between two or more persons and as they follow the different contenders running against each other, it seems reasonable that news coverage would be more balanced: This particular dance cannot be covered without attending to the different partners. On the basis of the news value theory, however, these changes in Germany can be seen as resulting not from general media trends, but from changes in the political sphere. In the same period that was studied by Schulz and Zeh (2006), we also saw changes in the expected election outcomes: In the first federal elections included in the study (1990 and 1994), the incumbent was expected to win (and did win in those two elections). In the subsequent elections, the opponent continued to have a realistic chance to win all the way up to Election Day—and even won two of the three elections (Forkmann & Richter, 2007).

In summary, if journalists focus on political initiatives and events sponsored by powerful and incumbent politicians—including during election campaigns—the inescapable result would be that political actors who hold power are more prominently covered than the opposition (Tresch, 2009). Moreover, this conclusion appears correct not only across countries, but also within countries: Hence, the incumbency bonus would follow changes of the government’s support. In particular, the bonus would change depending upon whether a government coalition in an upcoming election was expected to stay in power or not. In the absence of such an expectation, oppositional parties would obviously have more political relevance and, hence, be more newsworthy.
Commercialization of journalism and professionalization of politics

The extent of the incumbency bonus is affected not just by political power and differences between governments, but also by the style of political journalism. Political journalism has supposedly changed during the last couple of decades by increasingly focusing on politicians’ campaign tactics and on opinion polls. Two main causes for these changes are typically mentioned: the commercialization of the media market and the professionalization of politicians in regard to their media and communication efforts. Possibly, both can explain changes in election news coverage between countries and across time.

Focusing on the United States and the United Kingdom, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) described the postbellum changes of political journalism in three ages. In the so-called first age, shortly after World War II, journalism was substantive and issue dominated, and political actors had easy access to the media (Strömbäck, 2008). This situation changed—the second age—with the advent of television. Unlike many newspapers, television was politically more balanced and less biased; not only was it subject to greater control (e.g., by parliament), but it wanted to reach a larger audience having diverse political opinions (Starkey, 2007). Television news was also deemed an important factor in influencing the electorate, with the consequence that political parties have used more resources to develop strategies for attracting media attention (Neveu, 2002, p. 30). In summary, a “political logic” was gradually replaced by a “media logic,” in which “the requirements of the media take center stage and shape the means by which political communication is played out by political actors, is covered by the media, and is understood by the people” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 234).

This dynamic continues and is leading to the emergence of a more complex age of political communication. In what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) named the third age, we are witnessing an ongoing trend toward an even more dominating “media logic.” Political parties have become increasingly professionalized, and communication through the media is now considered an integral part of political processes (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001, p. 386). But because journalists resist being presented with ready-made packages by politicians, they have reacted by playing a more dominant role in news coverage, by focusing more on the campaign as a tactical game and by being more negative toward politics (Blumler, 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Goddard, Scammell, & Semetko, 1998; Patterson, 1997; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Extant research suggests that journalists’ negativity primarily affects the incumbent (Graber, 1991, p. 165; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 43; Starkey, 2007; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001, p. 309). Some researchers also argue that using opinion polls and stressing the strategic component can attract larger audiences simply through the resulting presentation of politics as a spectacular, sensational game (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Pallaver & Pig, 2003).

Plasser and Plasser (2002, p. 77) and Strömbäck (2007, p. 52) mention four general trends in news coverage of election campaigns common to Western and Latin American countries. First, reporting has become more personalized, with politics
presented as a “game between persons.” Second, issue coverage has been replaced by tactical analyses of how politicians are performing. Third, reporting has become increasingly negative. And fourth, there is a growing tendency toward “sportive dramatization.”

Despite these arguably common trends over time in political journalism, the trends are not equally pronounced in all countries. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, p. 258) note that “the experiences of other countries have been significantly different from the experiences of the United States,” where the trends in question are apparently the most pronounced. For example, strong public service traditions can counterbalance effects of commercialization (Brants & van Praag, 2006; Strömbäck, 2008, p. 242). Public service broadcasting is, by very definition, less affected by forces of commercialization than commercial broadcasting is. Moreover, public service broadcasting will not be influenced unilaterally by commercialization, but the influence will be mutual, with commercial television also needing to adapt to public service television: “[The] television market is structured by the competition between two collective actors (commercial vs. public television channels) for the largest audience. (. . .) Consequently, the competitors in the long run have no choice but to implement strategies which result in convergent programming” (Pfetsch, 1996, p. 434).

Summing up, rather than arguing that changes in election news coverage are driven by changes within the political system, the reasoning presented here suggests that the media market is the driving force. For example, the changes in election news coverage as reported by Schulz and Zeh (2006) can be understood as consequences of changes in the media market and not as changes in the expected election outcome. That said, we would expect less fundamental changes in political journalism in a country with an established public service tradition in broadcasting (such as our case, Denmark).

Hypotheses, method, and data

The above discussion of earlier results concerning the interconnections between a political system, the style of journalism, and incumbency bonuses serves as the basis for formulating several hypotheses. The first of these hypotheses summarizes the relationship between the government’s support and the incumbency bonus in terms of visibility:

**H1:** The incumbency bonus of the incumbent government is larger when the government is expected to win the ongoing election campaign.

Similarly, also based on the above discussion, a number of hypotheses on how the style of news coverage has been changing over time are formulated. They will help us to study whether changes in election news coverage are driven by changes in the media markets or by changes within the political system. In the case of the former, we would expect to find unidirectional trends with respect to issue coverage, framing, and tone in general—especially on commercial television. In the case of the
latter, we would expect news coverage of election campaigns to focus more on the competitive aspects of an election campaign when incumbency is challenged:

**H2:** Election news coverage increasingly deals with the campaign itself and less and less with policy issues.

**H3:** The coverage of elections is increasingly framed in terms of their strategic elements.

**H4:** The tone toward politicians in news stories is increasingly negative.

**H5:** The trends described in the hypotheses H2 to H4 will appear first and be particularly pronounced in commercial, as opposed to public service, broadcasting.

**H6:** In competitive campaigns (i.e., the government is risking the loss of power), there is less focus on policy, more focus on the strategic news, and a more negative tone in the news.

To test these hypotheses, a content analysis of election news coverage spanning over five national elections from 1994 to 2007 was conducted. The extent of a possible incumbency bonus (in terms of appearances) is investigated by counting the proportions of appearances by politicians in news stories dealing with the campaign or politicians. For all appearing actors, the news stories’ tone for or against them was coded. Where appropriate we report whether differences between actors or broadcasting stations are statistically significant (in case of proportions, results are based on z-tests as suggested by Agresti & Finlay, 1997).

Looking at the news stories, the dominant issue and the framing of each news story were coded. Following previous research, a news story was coded as covering nonsubstantive politics when the dominant issue was campaigning, electioneering, voters, and the like, whereas it was coded as focusing on substantive policy when it dealt with specific policy issues such as health care or education (see D’Angelo et al., 2005; Esser & D’Angelo, 2006).

In relation to framing, coders were instructed to code news stories as framed by strategy when politicians were explicitly presented with reference to their campaigning tactics and strategies. For all of these measures, intercoder reliability reached acceptable levels. The content analysis covers all news bulletins that were broadcast during the 4 weeks prior to each Election Day (see Table 1 for details), thereby capturing the complete Danish election campaign, which has a normal duration of around 3 weeks. For ease and clarity, the presentation of the results will focus on general trends followed by a comparison of news stories with the prime minister candidates (leaders of the two major parties in Danish politics), who arguably are the two most central actors in an election campaign.

Denmark is a suitable case to study because of its variance in the two central variables of interest in this study: increasing commercialization of the media market and changes in the power distribution within the political system. Until 1988, there was only one Danish public service television channel, Danmarks Radio (Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR). This public channel is financed by licensing fees
imposed on all Danish households owning radios or televisions and is only indirectly controlled by the political system. In 1986, parliament decided to establish a commercially run alternative named TV2/Danmark (Powers, Kristjansdottir, & Sutton, 1994), which came into operation 2 years later. Until 2004, this channel received some licensing fees but was always mainly financed by commercial advertisements. Although TV2 is not privately owned, it is, in effect, a commercial channel, and its initial setup, coupled with the way that it has developed over the years, illustrates the increased commercialization of the Danish media market. Both television stations are obliged to cover politics in a balanced fashion, but no specific rules, either legal or internal, have been established for that purpose (Danish Broadcasting Corporation, 2007; Kamil, 2007; Lund, 1975).

At first, the news programs on commercial television (i.e., on TV2) were somewhat unsuccessful. By the early 1990s, however, the news programs on commercial television had become serious competitors of the public service news (on DR). And since that time, commercial television’s news programs have actually been more popular (in terms of overall number of viewers), although the difference is not great. In 2006, public television implemented several changes to their news coverage, indicating that these changes were driven by a marketing logic (Claudi, Sølund, & Thorsen, 2006; Holm, Svith, & Kartveit, 2008).

As we are interested in analyzing the effects of commercialization on news coverage, we analyzed the content of both stations’ news coverage of all national elections from 1994 to 2007, or five national election campaigns overall. Although, given the advent of TV2 in 1988, one might prefer to have data available on earlier election campaigns, the commercialization of the media market is an ongoing process that is, we believe, well captured by our data. The time period covered in this study saw competition between the public service and commercial news bulletins, continuously spurring a process toward finding new ways to gain an edge and increase audience shares. This process affected both the public service and commercial television news bulletins (Hjarvard, 2006).

Generally speaking, the design of the Danish political system leads one to expect a minor incumbency bonus in news coverage: Similar to, for example, the Dutch
political system, the Danish system has many parties represented in the parliament; the Danish head of government is not as politically dominant as his counterpart in, for example, Germany; and there is usually a coalition government without a parliamentary majority.

However, the political situation changed over the years: Just prior to 1994, the government was a (de facto) majority government. Moreover, the governments calling the elections in 2005 and 2007 were supported by exceptionally stable majorities (cf. Christiansen & Damgaard, 2008; Damgaard, 2007). The incumbent prime minister was in these three elections expected to stay in office. The election campaigns in 1998 and 2001 were different: According to the majority of polls taken prior to and during the 1998 and 2001 election campaigns, the prime minister was expected to lose, which actually happened in 2001. With regard to hypothesis 1, we would therefore expect a larger incumbency bonus for the strongly supported governments of the 1994, 2005, and 2007 elections than for the less supported 1998 and 2001 governments. To what extent a government was expected to win or lose the election will be established by opinion poll figures 1 month prior to the Election Day.7

Summing up, the data cover a period with variance on two supposedly causal aspects: the challenge of a public service television channel by a new, commercially run station and the coverage of elections during periods of both strong and weak governments.

Findings

Political power and media visibility

As a first step, appearances of politicians in all election news stories are analyzed. Following the above discussion on differences between countries and given the Danish political system of minority governments, one would not expect a large incumbency bonus. Nevertheless, any incumbency bonus is still expected to be correlated with the current support behind the government and the opposition.

The solid lines in Figure 1 show the differences between all actors representing the government and its supporting parties, and those representing the opposition.8 Comparing the visibility of the government with the visibility of the opposition, an incumbency bonus reflecting the government’s support is, as expected, evident: In 1994, 2005, and 2007 the incumbency bonus was larger than in 1998 and 2001, the latter of which turned out to be the only election campaign where both political blocs were equally present in the news coverage (in 1994, 2005, and 2007, differences between the political blocs are significant9). There were no major differences between public service and commercial broadcasting with respect to appearances of politicians from the two political blocs (not shown).

Relative to its standing in the polls—shown in Figure 1 by the dashed lines—the government experienced in all elections an average incumbency bonus of 7 percentage points, whereas the opposition experienced a parallel disadvantage
of the same amount (excluding 2005). In relative terms, the advantages and disadvantages were the most pronounced in 1994 and 2007, less so in 1998, 2001, and 2005. This second set of findings reinforces the first set; that is, the incumbency bonus relative to the standing in the polls seems to increase or decrease, depending upon whether the government is stronger or weaker (as reflected in its standing in the polls). The 2005 election—held at a time when the opposition had unusually low figures in the polls (see Figure 1)—was the only election campaign during which the standing in the polls is roughly matched by attention in the media.

From the perspective of news value theory, these results are not surprising. Although the government was less supported in 1998 and 2001, the majorities prior to the elections of 1994 and after 2001 were more stable. In summary, hypothesis 1 is supported.

The two lower lines in Figure 1 show the proportion of appearances by the two prime minister candidates in news stories, in comparison with appearances by all politicians. As expected, the prime minister in power is seen to have an incumbency bonus vis-à-vis his main contender.

**News coverage: Issues**
The upper solid lines in Figure 2 show that in both stations around 60% of news coverage with reference to politicians or the ongoing election campaign is policy focused. This level is high compared to other countries (e.g., Brants & van Praag, 2006; Lichter, 2001; Pallaver & Pig, 2003; Schulz & Zeh, 2006). Furthermore, as expected, the level of such news actually is higher in years with a larger incumbency bonus (only the 1998 figure for commercial television is an exception). Note also that in four of the five election campaigns, the level of policy news is the same on both television stations (in 2005, the difference is significant, \( z = 3.95, p < .01, N = 561 \)).

Next, we analyze the extent to which the prime minister candidates appeared in news stories mainly dealing with policy issues and not with politics. As can be seen in Figure 2 (dashed lines), in some campaigns a slight general bonus was
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0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%

Public service tv
Commercial tv
Incumbent
Opponent

Figure 2 Proportion of political reporting on policy issues. Proportion of political news reporting on policy issues in public service and commercial broadcasting; proportion of news stories with either prime minister candidate which covers policy issues.

found for the incumbent with regard to appearances in policy news stories (in 1998 and 2005, the differences approach standard levels of statistical significance, 1998: \( z = 1.70, p = .09, N = 140; 2005: z = 1.94, p = .05; N = 341 \)). Figure 2 also reveals a surprising result: Over the course of five elections, prime minister candidates increasingly appeared in policy news stories.

In summary, we did not find a sizable and persistent bonus for the incumbent prime minister with respect to coverage of policy issues. Although the commercial television station’s news programs are the more popular, we did not find signs that the commercial station was leading a change in election news coverage, contrary to what one might expect from the literature on changes in the media market. Hypothesis 2—a decrease in covering policy issues—was not supported.

News coverage: Strategic framing

Hypothesis 3 suggests increasing levels of strategy-framed news coverage of election campaigns. Figure 3 reveals a different picture than did the results, mentioned above, of changes in the attention to policy issues: Commercial news coverage seems to be taking the lead toward more strategic framing (solid lines). This general increase of

Figure 3 Proportion of strategy-framed political reporting. Proportion of reporting with strategic framing in public service and commercial broadcasting; proportion of news stories with either prime minister candidate which is strategy framed.
such framing peaked, however, around the beginning of the new millennium (in 2001, the difference between commercial and public service broadcasting is statistically significant, $z = 2.70, p < .01; N = 447$). Thereafter, the difference decreased. In 2007, the figure for commercial television was actually lower than for public service television. Therefore, changes in news coverage are obviously not unidirectional. Moreover, the overall trend mirrors the increase and decrease of the incumbency bonus shown in Figure 1. That said, in 2007 the level of strategic framing was still at a higher level than in 1994, indicating that changes took place as expected.

Looking at news stories covering the two candidates running for head of government (dashed lines), results follow the same pattern as the overall election coverage. However, none of the differences between the prime minister candidates are statistically significant.

Summing up, in terms of the overall election news coverage, an increase of strategic framing was found, peaking in the early 2000s. Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported. This finding confirms expectations on the general trends in political journalism. However, these changes seem to affect different political actors the same way: We do not find a systematic difference between the two prime minister candidates.

**News coverage: Tone**

The next question is whether election news coverage of politicians has become increasingly negative. As can be seen in Figure 4 (solid lines), election news did tend to be slightly more negative than positive—with commercial television seemingly more negative than public service television—but the difference is not statistically significant. No clear trend, either positive or negative, can be discerned. Here, again (as with strategic framing), news stories reached a (negative) peak around the beginning of the new millennium. After increasing in negativity from 1994 to 2001, election news coverage is again less negative.10

The news coverage of prime minister candidates follows the above directions, with two exceptions: For 2001, we find a generally positive tone toward the opponent ($t(281) = 4.06, p < .01$), whereas 4 years later this picture was reversed ($t(339) = 3.67, p < .01$). The results seem to track the character of the elections themselves: In

![Figure 4](image-url) Average tone toward politicians appearing in the news. Average tone toward political actors in public service and commercial broadcasting; average tone toward prime minister candidates.
2001, the opponent had a very good chance of winning the election (and eventually did), whereas in 2005, the situation was the reverse.

To summarize, though coverage in the beginning of the period under scrutiny has become slightly more negative than it used to be, the change in that direction has stopped. In three of the five elections, we found no major differences between the two prime minister candidates, but in two cases—one a very successful and the other a very unsuccessful campaign—the coverage by journalists reflected the nature and projected results of the campaigns themselves. In other words, rather than changing as a result of the changes in the media market, the tone appears to reflect the current political situation. Thus, hypothesis 4—that news coverage is increasingly negative—cannot be upheld.

**Political power versus the media market**

Hypothesis 5 argued that the trends suggested in hypotheses H2 to H4 will appear first and be especially pronounced in commercial, as opposed to public service, broadcasting. Clearly, as is evident from the presentation of the findings above, that has not happened. Hence, commercial broadcasting seems not to drive political journalism in a certain direction that is then followed by public service broadcasting. In summary, hypothesis 5 is not supported.

Second, hypothesis 6 argued that in competitive campaigns (i.e., the election campaigns in 1998 and 2001), there is less focus on policy but more focus on the strategic news, along with a more negative tone. We did see somewhat lower levels of focus on policy, more focus on strategy news, and more negativity in the 1998 and 2001 campaigns, but the trends over the years are not as clear-cut as the hypothesis suggests. Hence, we conclude that there is partial support only for hypothesis 6.

**Discussion**

This article identified and empirically investigated two crucial factors that potentially determine the extent of a government’s advantage, vis-à-vis the opposition, in election news coverage: changes in political power and changes in the media market.

The results demonstrate a relationship between a government’s support and an incumbency bonus in terms of visibility. At the same time, changes in the level of policy and strategy-framed news reporting, as well as negativity toward political actors, seem to have followed the trends in this incumbency bonus. The overall trends in Denmark are the same as those in Germany, where less policy coverage goes hand in hand with a decreased incumbency bonus. That said, the trends in Denmark are not as clear as in neighboring Germany. For example, over the years both the Danish prime minister and his main opponent have been increasingly shown in news stories on policy issues.

Despite these mixed results, overall the results corroborate what one would expect from the perspective of news value theory: The more powerful you are, the
more attention you receive. In comparison with other countries with different power distributions, the incumbency bonus is, as expected, not large in Danish election news coverage, which reflects the roughly equal power distribution in the national political system (de Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Pallaver & Pig, 2003; Schoenbach, 1991; Semetko, 1996; van Aelst et al., 2006). We also found a change over time within the country, further confirming the relationship between political power and the incumbency bonus: Governments with more support (i.e., expected winners of an election) had a larger incumbency bonus than weaker governments. A similar relationship between standing in the polls and media appearances was found by Asp (2006) analyzing Swedish elections coverage. The general similarity of the two Danish broadcasting stations concerning the visibility of politicians also confirms that journalists are largely basing news coverage on the news value of different politicians in relation to policy, not politics.

We do find signs of increasing strategic framing, along with increasing negativity. But these trends seem to have peaked around the beginning of the new millennium. Even though one has to be cautious with bold conclusions based on only five time-points, these results suggest that changes in the news coverage of election campaigns are more conditioned by the political situation and less driven by changes in the media market, at least in the case of Denmark.

Moreover, commercial broadcasting seems not to drive political journalism in a certain direction that is then, over time, followed by public service broadcasting (leaving hypothesis 5 unsupported). Similar to other countries, we seem to witness a mutual adaptation between both types of broadcasters. Such a mutual adaptation is also apparent, for example, in Germany (Pfetsch, 1996), Sweden (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001), and the Netherlands (Brants & van Praag, 2006). These results indicate that it is misleading to assert, without qualification, that commercialization necessarily leads to a certain kind of news coverage and to an unrelenting increase of, for example, strategic framing (cf. Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Strömbäck, 2007). In fact, in a media market with strong public service broadcasting, it can be economically rational for commercial television to adapt to its public service competitors (Pfetsch, 1996; Strömbäck, 2007).

Because of their potentially vital impact on politics and on the coverage of elections, changes in political journalism and news coverage obviously need to be subject to ongoing research (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 39). This study of Danish journalism—covering only five election campaigns—makes a small, but real, contribution in that regard. A next step, for example, would be to disentangle in more detail and in a comparative setting the effects that changing political power and trends in media markets have on the content of news coverage. The study at hand seems to indicate that alterations in political power are more consequential than changes in the media market. More generally, another step would be to determine whether countries with more parties in parliament tend to have more policy-oriented coverage either generally or in elections, as this diversity can imply more party agendas and actors who can be covered by the media. That said, this study has contributed to the ongoing
discussions on the media-politics nexus and hereby can function as an informative guide in further research.

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Notes

1 This point obviously also holds for the U.S. political system (cf. van Aelst et al., 2008). However, to keep the following discussion from becoming unduly complicated, results from presidential political systems are not included.

2 A more detailed definition of the term “political power” is beyond the scope of this paper. Sufficient for the discussion here is to say that what seems to be important is, for example, the number of political actors (e.g., parties represented in parliament) or, in election news coverage, whether a government is assumed to stay in power. For a more detailed discussion see Schoenbach et al. (2001), de Swert and Walgrave (2002), or Tresch (2009).

3 Included are mentions, sight-, and sound-bites of government or parliament members, candidates for parliamentary seats, mayors, European Parliament members, and group actors (i.e., government, supporting parties, opposition). Certain candidates of minor importance are excluded (i.e., candidates from Greenland).

4 Specifically, it was coded whether a news story—from the point of view of each single actor—had a neutral or mixed ( = 0), negative ( = −1), or positive ( = 1) tone.

5 In all cases, two-tailed probabilities are reported. Independence between samples is assumed.

6 Krippendorf’s alpha for political news story yes/no is .95; news story issue, .81; news story length (seconds), .96; strategic framing, 1.00; actor affiliation (e.g., party), .96; actor position (e.g., MP), .96; and tone, .75.

7 The opinion poll figures used in the latter analysis were collected roughly 1 month prior to the Election Day. Data were kindly provided by Søren Risbjerg Thomsen, University of Aarhus.

8 For the 1994 election, two left-wing parties were grouped as supporting the government.

9 In detail, the results are as follows: 1994: $z = 6.82, p < .01$, $N = 721$; 1998: $z = 1.56, p = .12$, $N = 874$; 2001: $z = 0.06, p = .95$, $N = 1, 154$; 2005: $z = 5.92, p < .01$, $N = 1, 560$; 2007: $z = 8.11, p < .01$, $N = 1, 616$.

10 Looking at the proportions (instead of the mean) of politicians who were coded as being presented with a positive or negative, instead of a neutral or mixed, tone, one finds the same sort of increase in the first years, but then a drop in 2007 to the initial levels of 1994.

References


Incumbency Bonus in Election News Coverage


