A Worldwide Presidential Election: The Impact of the Media on Candidate and Campaign Evaluations

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Abstract

The 2008 U.S. Presidential election was a worldwide event that gained significant public and media attention well beyond the borders of the United States. In this study, we assess the impact of media coverage of Presidential candidates Obama and McCain on public opinion dynamics in the Netherlands. Drawing on three sources of data—a media content analysis, ten repeated cross-sectional surveys and a two-wave panel survey—we assess media effects on candidate campaign evaluations and expectations of who will the election on the macro- and micro-level. We find that media favorability increases positive evaluations of McCain, while being exposed to the campaign in general contributed to more favorable assessments of Obama. We explain these results by pointing to the overwhelmingly stable and positive coverage of Obama in international media.

News media are a crucial source of information during election times (Domke et al., 1997). The way in which the news cover an election campaign can influence public opinion and electoral behavior (Beck, Dalton, Green, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2010; Pfau, Cho, & Chong, 2001; Shaw & Roberts, 2000). Whereas these dynamics have been investigated in national contexts, little is known about how people perceive a nondomestic election race, and to what degree international news coverage affects public opinion about foreign
candidates. Media influences on perceptions of international politics in general are well documented (e.g., Soroka, 2003; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004; Nacos, Shapiro, & Isernia, 2000). A crucial point in this literature is the fact that public opinion about international politics may depend more strongly on mass-mediated information, since the objects are usually far removed from daily life routines (Page & Shapiro, 1992). For distant issues, the mass media are citizens’ most important source of information (Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006) and people learn about elections in which they cannot vote from media coverage (Zurkin & Snyder, 1984).

This contribution combines two perspectives, media effects on candidate perceptions and on international affairs by considering the influence of media coverage on perceptions of nondomestic presidential candidates. Thereby, pre-existing biases among the electorate that may make investigations of media effects in domestic election contexts more complicated become less pertinent. Hence, media effects in election campaigns can be studied in a realistic setting while circumventing the need to take into account pre-existing biases or to create hypothetical candidates. Furthermore, the selection bias with which citizens tend to chose media outlets (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Smith, Fabrigar, & Norris, 2008) is likely to be of less concern in such a case. On the one hand, tendencies of media for nondomestic candidates may be harder to anticipate and less strongly lined up with editorial preferences (Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010), and on the other hand peoples’ preferences are likely to be less strongly developed and therefore less likely to structure news exposure patterns. Finally, the study of public opinion dynamics of a nondomestic race contributes to an understanding of media effects of international affairs more generally.

The election for President of the United States usually—and arguably increasingly—receives widespread attention in international media (e.g., Melischek & Seethaler, 2008; Nitz & Ihlen, 2009; Porto, 2001; Thorén, 1971; Vliegenthart et al., 2010). Although non-U.S. citizens have no stake in and there are little direct consequences of an U.S. election for them, it is obvious that it does matter beyond the borders of the U.S. who is elected into office. If the United States is the remaining superpower, if the U.S. President is rightfully referred to as the leader of the free world, and if one considers the international consequences of U.S. politics in the field of foreign policy, then in effect U.S. Presidential elections indirectly are highly consequential, also outside the United States (see also Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010). The 2008 U.S. Presidential election offers an unique opportunity to investigate news coverage and opinion dynamics in a nondomestic election campaign, that is to say media effects on public opinion of international affairs. Arguably never before has an election race received as much worldwide attention as the race between Barack Obama and John McCain (including also the primaries between Obama and Hillary Clinton). A Gallup poll held just before the elections indicated that a
majority of West-Europeans considered the outcome of the Presidential elections to make a difference for their country. For example, 80% of the Brits indicated to agree with this statement, while this percentage was 71% for France, 62% for Germany, and 60% for the Netherlands.

This study deals with the role of news media for opinion dynamics regarding Obama and McCain in the Netherlands during the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election campaign. It forms an important addition to the existing literature on the coverage of U.S. elections in non-U.S. news media outlets (for a review see Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010). We assess the impact of news media favorability toward both candidates on changes in public evaluations and expectations on a macro and microlevel, drawing on a media content analysis, a two-wave panel survey and 10 weekly cross-sectional surveys. Rather than focusing on media effects on hypothetical vote choice, we assess influences on respondents’ evaluations of the campaign conduct and viability assessments of the two candidates. Thereby, we do not only contribute to an understanding of opinion dynamics regarding an election abroad, but also of media effects on candidate perceptions. Furthermore, we contribute to the literature on the role of the media for perceptions of international affairs.

**Media Effects in International Political Affairs**

Why should the media matter at all for perceptions of U.S. Presidential candidates in a foreign country, and why is this interesting to investigate? We argue that the media’s role for opinion dynamics in nondomestic election races is different for three reasons. First, patterns of selective media usage are less likely to interfere with media exposure effects; second, citizens are less likely to hold firm pre-existing opinions; and third, information provided through the mass media matters more for distant international events. We do not aim to address these differences in a comparative design, but we provide a case study that gives some evidence for these claims to work: The 2008 U.S. Presidential election.

When it comes to media influences on perceptions of political candidates or vote choice, selective media exposure is important. Selective exposure refers to the idea that people select the news outlets that they use based on their political preferences (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Smith et al., 2008; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). In the case of U.S. presidential elections that would mean that those who like one candidate better than the other would also prefer to expose themselves to media contents that favor their preferred candidate (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Such selective exposure, however, is unlikely to translate into media choice in a nondomestic election race. First, news outlets usually tend to be less likely to show strong and systematic biases for one or the other candidate (e.g., Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010). This also means that, second, citizens
tend to be less likely to be aware of the anyway less evident partisanship of news outlets. If editorial positions do not align with international election coverage, then we see a considerable smaller likelihood of selective exposure patterns to emerge.

Whereas many citizens in domestic elections have pre-existing preferences for a certain party or candidate based on well-established party identifications—though decreasingly so (e.g., Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000)—this observation arguably applies less strongly to nondomestic races. People are usually much less familiar with foreign parties and candidates and therefore opinions can be expected to be more fluid and thus subject to media influences. This in particular applies to races without an incumbent candidate, such as the 2008 U.S. Presidential election race, in which both contenders are new players on the international political scene.

Finally, literature on media effects on perceptions of international affairs emphasizes the importance of mass mediated information (Wanta et al., 2004). It is primarily through the mass media that citizens of one country—if at all—learn about events in another country. Accordingly, media contents are expected to provide an even more important impetus to opinion dynamics in international than in domestic affairs.

The considerations give ample space for media effects to occur in the case of nondomestic election races, maybe even more so than in national contexts. From what is known about the coverage of U.S. Presidential elections in non-U.S. news media, it is evident that the coverage is very event oriented—in particular towards the conventions, the debates, and election day, that it inhibits a strong focus on horse-race elements and the Presidential candidates, and is much geared towards a strategic framing of the campaign (Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010; Porto, 2001; Scammell, 2005; Schulz, 2001; Vliegenthart et al., 2010). By and large, it can be argued that in terms of the features of the coverage, we see some similarity in how nondomestic and U.S. media cover the election (Pfau, Shane, & Semmler, 2007; Stromback & Dimitrova, 2006). None of the prior investigations of non-domestic news coverage of U.S. elections, however, has considered the consequences of such coverage for nondomestic public opinion.

Candidate News, Candidate Evaluations, and Viability Assessments

Political news coverage is argued to be increasingly focused on political leaders and candidates, on their personality and character, and at the same time tends to ignore parties and party programs, policy and substantial issue coverage (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Wattenberg, 1998). Candidates rather than parties are at the center of election campaign communications, which finds its reflection in news coverage. This may be less the
case in multi-party contexts, but it certainly applies to the situation in the United States. Strong political leaders are said to provide an answer to changing demands of the electorate and voters are argued to be mainly interested in the performance of these politicians during the campaign, rather than in their political viewpoints (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn 2008).

While this increasing importance of and focus on politicians and personalities is not limited to the U.S. context (e.g., King, 2002), it may in particular apply to the U.S. Presidential elections. Inherently, by choosing the holder of maybe the most important political office worldwide, personal characteristics, and performance are of specific importance. Indeed, the coverage of the U.S. Presidential election campaigns focuses to a large extent on the candidates and how they perform in public and how well they are doing in the polls (Baum, 2005; Farnsworth & Lichter 2003). As discussed above, this observation stretches beyond the U.S. media (Melischek & Seethaler, 2008; Nitz & Ihlen, 2009; Porto, 2001; Thorén, 1971; Vliegenthart et al., 2010).

A wealth of studies has looked at the role of media for public opinion dynamics in U.S. Presidential elections over the past decades. Questions relate to media effects on turnout (Gentzkow, 2006; Prior, 2005; Shaffer, 1981) or cynicism towards politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Beyond these, assessments of media effects on Presidential approval ratings, candidate assessments, and vote choice are prominent in the U.S. literature (e.g., Althaus & Kim, 2008; Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995; Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). It was shown that newspaper editorials did affect readers’ candidate preferences (Dalton et al., 1998) or that media coverage of campaign events influenced candidates’ electoral prospects (Shaw & Roberts, 2000). Domke and colleagues (1997) specifically looked at dynamics of presidential preferences during the 1996 campaign and found media coverage to be a strong explanatory factor for changes in public preferences: More positive news coverage resulted in more public support for the candidate, while negative coverage had the opposite effect.

The present study considers the effects of evaluative coverage on public evaluations of the candidates’ campaign conduct and on their perceived chances of winning the elections. We draw on a broad conception of media coverage that relates to overall candidate favorability. Such favorability may include substantive issue considerations that are not only dealt with in an evaluative manner, but also may relate to assessments of candidate characteristics or personality. The dependent variables bear strong relationship with prior research in the U.S. context in which candidates are of central importance. An assessment of direct candidate support, however, would be unrealistic, since the audience here is not able to vote for one of the candidates. Therefore, we chose a more indirect form of candidate campaign evaluations that are considered relevant in the literature (Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 1997; Funk, 1999).
Whereas candidate campaign evaluations are more retrospective in nature, looking at how the candidates and their campaigns were performing, we also consider viability assessments of the candidates. The latter are of a prospective kind, assessing the expected viability of the candidates at the polls. Starting with the former, campaign evaluations can be affected by exposure to different types of political advertising (Sides, Lipsitz, & Grossmann, 2010). Also, different types of (mass) communication matters, such as presidential debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003), political advertising (Wattenberg & Brians, 1999), the Internet (Johnson & Kaye, 2004), or nontraditional news sources (Pfau et al., 2001). Here, we focus on the effects of traditional news media content, still the primary source of political information for most citizens. Research on media and vote preferences showed perceptions of candidates performance to be an important mediating variable, particularly influenced by the extent to which a candidate is presented as successful in media coverage (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, de Ridder, van Hoof, & Vliegenthart, 2003). Accordingly, we expect that favorable candidate news coverage will contribute to positive evaluations of his campaign conduct. In a nondomestic context, direct effects of advertising or debates are arguably less relevant than news media coverage. Besides this, however, we have very little reason to believe the basic direction of media effects to be different and therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \] Exposure to favorable news coverage of a candidate positively affects evaluations of his/her campaign.

With regard to our second dependent variable, viability assessments of the two candidates, we expect a similar effect. In investigating this we go back to Abromowitz’s work (1989) on assessments of electoral success and electability. Viability expectations are less stable than preferences for Presidential candidates (Granberg & Brent, 1983) and therefore likely to be prone to media influences. Since a considerable part of the coverage about the candidates consists of reports about how well they are doing in the polls, this horse-race coverage may determine, at least to some extent, the overall favorability of this coverage (Mutz, 1995, p. 1038). Little is known about the effects of media favorability on candidate viability assessments though. Mutz (1995) has shown an impact of horse-race media spin on campaign contributions in U.S. elections. Horse-race assessments in the media were also found to affect viability assessments (Kahn, 1992). It is likely that the public, that has little other sources to rely on, will adopt the predictions that are presented in the media and is directly influenced in its assessment of the viability of the different candidates.

\[ H_2: \] Exposure to favorable horserace news coverage of a candidate positively affects expectations of winning the election.
Finally, we add that we expect these patterns to be seen on both the macro and the micro level. Whereas usually the literature about media effects on electoral preferences links to opinion formation on the individual level, studies have also demonstrated that the news environments matters for party support dynamics on the aggregate level (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007) Hopmann et al. (2010) in a recent study showed how visibility and tone towards a political party positively affected voter likelihood for that party, in particular as a result of the information environment and only for undecided voters as a result of variation in individual media exposure. Therefore, drawing on a unique combination of data, we tackle the second hypothesis formulated above from both a micro and a macro perspective, which provides additional validation to our findings. Also a macrolevel perspective would indicate that mass-mediated information does potentially also matter for aggregate public opinion shifts rather than merely to change in individuals’ evaluations that may or may not translates into aggregate changes at the mass level. Finally, the microperspective offers the opportunity to study media effects at detail over a short time-span, whereas the macro perspective captures a longer period and thus demonstrates how media potentially affect over-time public opinion dynamics.

Methods

To gauge media effects on public opinion during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections in the Netherlands, we rely on three different sources of data: (a) a two-wave panel survey during the last weeks of the campaign, (b) weekly cross-sectional surveys in the last ten weeks of the campaign, and (c) a systematic media content analysis of the main Dutch national news outlets throughout the final 10 weeks. This design allows for testing media effects on the macro and on the microlevel and for an integration of media content and survey data on the individual level to assess microlevel opinion change.

The weekly cross-sectional surveys were conducted online and respondents were randomly drawn from a sample of approximately 200,000 Dutch citizens that is representative of the Dutch population. The AAPOR response rates (RR1) for these 10 cross-sections range between .70 and .82. In the 10 weeks before Election Day, respondents filled out an online questionnaire between Thursday and Sunday of that week. The number of respondents ranges between 536 and 715. We posed a simple question to these samples of the Dutch population, probing respondents’ expectations as to who they thought would win the election. The question wording was “Of which candidate do you expect that he will become the President of the United States?” with “John McCain,” “Barack Obama,” and “don’t know” as answer categories. The aggregated weekly scores for expecting Obama and for expecting McCain to
win serve to compute the dependent variables for the macrolevel analysis. These scores range between 45.6 and 73.2% for Obama and between 5 and 21.8% for McCain.

To investigate opinion change on the individual-level, we conducted a two-wave panel survey during the campaign. The first wave of the online survey was fielded from September 10 to 21, 2008 and the second wave from September 25 to October 5, 2008. For 97.3% of the respondents there were at least 7 days between the first and the second wave. The total number of respondents used in the subsequent analysis is 1,191. A comparison of respondents that participated in the second wave with those that dropped out after the first wave revealed no significant differences in terms of education and media use between the two groups. The only significant differences was in age, with those people participating in the second wave being somewhat older (difference 3.2 years, $t = 2.659$, $p < .01$). Respondents were drawn from the same database described above, but were not part of the cross-section samples. The AAPOR response rate (RR1) for wave 1 was 61.6%, and of those respondents 62.9% took part in wave 2. The sample is a fair representation of the Dutch population in terms of age, gender, and education. In the Appendix A, a comparison of sample statistics and statistics for the Dutch population is presented, both for the background variables and for media exposure statistics. Regarding the latter we note that usually media-related measures are constructed differently when population level data are gathered (e.g., total number of viewers of individual newscasts, circulation figures for newspapers). Still, the rank-order for both television news as well as newspapers is similar for the sample and the population.

We focus on two dependent variables. First, we again probed respondents’ expectations regarding who would win the elections. The question wording was the same as in the cross-sectional surveys and we constructed dummy variables for each candidate (Obama $w_1 M = 0.51, SD = 0.50$; $w_2 M = 0.47, SD = 0.49$; McCain $w_1 M = 0.19, SD = 0.39$; $w_2 M = 0.13, SD = 0.33$). Furthermore, we measured evaluations of the campaign efforts of Obama and McCain. These were gauged by respondents’ agreement with the following statement on a 4-point scale from “very much disagree” to “very much agree” for each candidate: “The campaign of Barack Obama/ John McCain was successful during the last weeks” (Obama $w_1 M = 3.02, SD = 0.59$; $w_2 M = 3.07, SD = 0.52$; McCain $w_1 M = 2.50, SD = 0.62$; $w_2 M = 2.85, SD = 0.61$).

The main independent variables relate to information from the mass media. In the first wave, we asked respondents to report how many days per week they would be exposed to each of those six national news outlets that were subject to the content analysis (see below) on either 6-point scales
On average, how many days per week do you read/watch [news outlet]?" (NOS $M = 4.29$, $SD = 2.48$; RTL $M = 3.33$, $SD = 2.52$; Volkskrant $M = 0.31$, $SD = 1.19$; NRC $M = 0.27$, $SD = 1.13$; Telegraaf $M = 0.89$, $SD = 1.93$; Spits $M = 1.30$, $SD = 1.70$). Also exposure to other media outlets was probed that were not content analyzed ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.17$). This variable serves as a control variable that would also include respondents in the analysis that use none of the main outlets we analyzed. Furthermore, we also asked for respondents’ attention to the US campaign in the media, and whether they had seen or read anything about the campaign in the last days before the second wave of the panel survey. The former matter was assessed by asking “To which extent do you follow the US elections?” with answers on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very closely” ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.77$). The latter measure relied on the question “During the past weeks, how often did you see or read anything about the US Presidential election?” answered on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “often” ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.77$).

To validly model media effects on opinion dynamics, we content analyzed four main Dutch national newspapers and the two most watched television newscasts during the final 10 weeks of the election campaign, from August 26, 2008, through to Election Day. These include broadsheet newspapers (Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad) as well as more sensation-oriented papers (Telegraaf, Spits) and public (NOS) and commercial broadcasters (RTL). We randomly—and proportionally to the overall number of stories per outlet—selected at least one story per day per medium that dealt with the US election, resulting in a total of 613 stories (NOS $n = 47$; RTL $n = 45$; Volkskrant $n = 212$; NRC $n = 141$; Telegraaf $n = 101$; Spits $n = 67$). The large $n$ for, for example NRC and Volkskrant, reflects a greater $n$ of stories about the elections in these outlets. Eight students from the University of Amsterdam, all native Dutch speakers, analyzed the coverage as part of a larger project on the coverage of the U.S. presidential elections in Western Europe. The students were thoroughly trained to work with the codebook, and the coding process was supervised on a weekly basis. The main variable used in this study is media favorability towards Obama and McCain, measured by means of explicit evaluations of the two candidates and/ or their campaigns in stories about the U.S. elections: “From the perspective of Obama/ McCain, how favourable would you say that the story is towards him/his campaign?” rated on a 5-point scale from “very unfavourable” (−2) to “very favourable” (2) (Obama $M = 0.55$, $SD = 1.03$; McCain $M = −0.36$, $SD = 1.01$). We distinguish between media favorability in general (see above) and in relation to horserace news by using a variable that identifies all stories that mention public opinion polls (1) versus stories not containing
poll information (0) \( M = 0.28, SD = 0.45 \). Stories that refer to polls were by-and-large more positive towards Obama and more negative towards McCain than stories that do not mention polls (Obama favorability in stories containing polls \( M = 0.83, SD = 1.09 \) versus \( M = 0.42, SD = 0.98 \) in stories not referring to polls \( \text{such as } F (1, 526) = 18.91, \ p < .001 \). McCain favorability in stories containing polls \( M = -0.53, SD = 1.10 \) versus \( M = -0.28, SD = 0.95 \) in stories no referring to polls \( \text{such as } F (1, 507) = 6.98, \ p < .01 \). Reliability assessments on a subsample of 42 news stories resulted in an average Krippendorff’s \( \alpha \) of .62 for the favorability measures, which is a satisfactory level of reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). Weekly aggregations of the scores of these measures serve as independent variables in the macro level analysis.

For the individual-level analysis, we integrated the media content data into the panel survey data. To do so, we computed for each respondent the time between the two panel waves and matched the aggregated media content for that specific time period by news outlet and then weighed this measure by frequency of exposure to that outlet. For example, the mean score for favorability Obama on NOS for R1 (between September 12 and 28) was 0.50 and for R2 (between September 17 and October 3) was 0.43. R1 watches NOS three times a week, R2 six times a week. This would result in an Obama favorability score of 1.50 for R1 and 2.58 for R2. This procedure is followed for each news outlet (if a respondent does not use a particular news outlet, s/he would score 0) and finally all outlet specific favorability scores are added up to yield a measure of favorability exposure. This allows for a good approximation of the information diet that people were exposed to between the panel waves.

In both, micro- and macro-level models we use change scores as dependent variables. We subtract the \( t - 1 \) from the \( t \) value, so that positive scores would indicate positive opinion change. Campaign assessments are explained relying on OLS regression models, whereas we use Ordered Logit regression models to explain changes in viability assessments. For the latter, the test for parallel lines indicates that such an analysis is indeed warranted and we do not have to use a multinomial model instead (Borooah, 2002).

**Results**

Before assessing media effects on individuals’ opinion change, we give a short description of the news coverage of the two candidates and provide the results of the macrolevel analysis. Figure 1 shows the over time developments of media favorability and expectations. It is evident that media favorability was overall rather negative towards McCain and positive towards Obama throughout the entire period. There were, however, some fluctuations. After the first
week favorability towards McCain shows a clear increase, whereas media coverage became less positive for Obama. In fact, week 36 marks the only point throughout the research period at which the media were more positive towards McCain than towards Obama, but only marginally so. Subsequently, favorability for McCain is on the decline until about five weeks before Election Day. Media favorability for Obama peaks six five before the election and after a short decline again in the week prior to the election. The trends in expectations show less variation from 1 week to the next, and expectations for Obama versus McCain clearly diverge throughout the entire period. Only in the first few weeks we see a slight increase for McCain and somewhat of a decrease for Obama. The figure provides a striking illustration of how media coverage and public expectations in the Netherlands moved in similar ways throughout the final weeks of the campaign.

In a next step, we regressed aggregate weekly change scores of public expectations on media favorability towards Obama and McCain in the preceding week in a OLS regression model. The results show that viability assessments of Obama and McCain are both driven by media favorability towards McCain. Positive media favorability for McCain negatively affects expectations of Obama winning the election ($\beta = -0.28$, $SE = 0.010$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .46$).
whereas it positively affects expectations of McCain becoming President ($\beta = .022$, SE = 0.007, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .64$). Media favorability for Obama did not yield significant effects in these models. These results provide first macro-level evidence of media effects on candidate assessments.

Before moving to the explanatory models on the microlevel, we consider media coverage of the two candidates in different Dutch news outlets. As shown in Figure 2, again news coverage was by and large positive for Obama and negative for McCain. There are inter-media differences however. In particular, the Telegraaf and to a lesser degree the Volkskrant and RTL news were less negative about McCain than the other outlets, but in none of the outlets favorability for McCain even approaches favorability for Obama. Also, we see that favorability for Obama was less pronounced in the Spits and NOS news. As noted in the ‘Methods’ section, stories featuring polls were more extreme in terms of favorability, which means they were even more positive towards Obama and even more negative towards McCain. We now turn to the question whether these differences in media favorability towards the two candidates in these media explain opinion change among their audiences?

As shown in Table I, exposure to more favorable coverage of McCain in the news leads to more positive assessments of the McCain campaign.
The same goes for Obama. For changes in evaluations of the Obama campaign, media favorability has a significant and positive effect: a one point-increase in media favorability results in a .09 change in Obama’s candidate evaluation. Exposure to more favorable coverage led to more favorable evaluations of the Obama campaign. Reporting to having seen something about the U.S. election in the media, however, has a stronger effect on evaluations of the Obama campaign. Those who report having seen news about the election became considerably more positive about the campaign than those who reported not having seen election news. Attention to the U.S. election campaign and exposure to news outlets that were not subject to our content analysis (i.e., unweighed exposure) did not matter for opinion change.

Concerning viability assessments, we find a somewhat different pattern, as shown in Table II. This table reports the results of the ordered logit model. The reported thresholds are in essence comparable with intercepts in an OLS regression and of little substantial interest here. The results of the analysis show that exposure to favorable McCain horserace coverage caused people to be significantly more likely to expect that McCain would become President. This suggests a higher likelihood that people will switch to expecting McCain instead of Obama to win compared to the other options (not expecting any change or expecting Obama instead of McCain to win) due to their exposure

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Note. Cell entries are unstandardized \( b \) coefficients of an OLS regression analysis. 
* \( p < .05 \); ** \( p < .01 \) (one-sided).

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We note that the inclusion of candidate sympathy scores to the model (that is, reported sympathy for Obama and for McCain) does not substantially alter the findings presented here.
to the news. For Obama, the favorability of horse-race coverage does not matter. Here attention to U.S. election news was driving opinion change, with paying more attention being related to a higher likelihood of expecting Obama to become President. So whereas for McCain the tone of the news was important to change people’s mind, for Obama it was important that they were interested in the news and attended to it, but the content of the news was less relevant.

We finally note that these media effects are rather robust and not caused by selection biases. When regressing exposure to favorable media coverage for either Obama or McCain on sympathy or viability assessments of both candidates at t1, we find no evidence of selection effects. For instance, there is no significant effect of liking Obama on consuming news coverage that is favorable towards Obama, neither in a bi-variate nor in a multi-variate design controlling for sociodemographics, campaign interests and attention. Apparently, selection bias does not come into play in this situation in which media cover a nondomestic election race.

Table II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expecting winner Obama</th>
<th>Expecting winner McCain</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimate</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold Obama/ McCain -1</td>
<td>−1.466***</td>
<td>0.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold Obama/ McCain 0</td>
<td>2.371***</td>
<td>0.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorability Obama</td>
<td>0.114</td>
<td>0.096</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorability McCain</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to U.S. election news</td>
<td>0.439***</td>
<td>0.109</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seen U.S. elections news</td>
<td>−0.092</td>
<td>0.122</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure other news</td>
<td>−0.010</td>
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<td>Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$</td>
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<td>−2 Log Likelihood</td>
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<tr>
<td>LR Chi-square</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>1,192</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cell entries are estimate and Standard errors of an Ordinal Logit regression analysis. Test of parallel lines was not significant for both models.

**$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$ (one-sided)

Conclusion

The interest of this study was to investigate media effects on U.S. Presidential candidate assessments outside the United States. Relying on three different
types of data, media content, cross-sectional, and panel survey data, on analyses on the macro and microlevel, and on the integration of media content and survey data on the microlevel, we were able to assess media influence of the coverage of Obama and McCain on candidate perceptions among the Dutch public. Rather than asking an unrealistic question about who people would vote for, we focused on two important campaign outcomes that have been identified in prior research: candidate campaign evaluations and viability assessment. These dependent variables are well established in the literature (e.g., Abramowitz, 1989; Lodge et al., 1989) and we investigated media effects on the evaluations of how the candidates' campaign was going and on expectations as to who would win the election. We expected that favorable media coverage of the candidates would contribute to more positive campaign evaluations and to higher expectations of winning the elections.

With a few qualifications, our expectations were met by our empirical findings. Changes in expectations of McCain becoming the new President were explained by news media favorability towards him and his campaign, both on the micro- and macrolevel (supporting H2). Similarly, also dynamics of evaluations of McCain's campaign were explained by favorable media coverage (supporting H1). The more positively the news covered McCain, and the more people were exposed to this coverage, the more likely they were to like the McCain campaign. None of the other measures related to mass media information about the U.S. elections did explain opinion change for McCain.

For Obama the story is somewhat less clear-cut and media favorability was much less of an issue for public opinion dynamics when it came to evaluate his campaign and assess his viability. Both on the micro- and on the macrolevel, changes in expectations were, by contrast to McCain, not explained by Obama's favorability in the news (not supporting H2). On the macrolevel, McCain media evaluations were driving changes in Obama's viability assessments and the more positively McCain was covered, the less it was expected that Obama would become President. On the microlevel, in particular paying attention to the U.S. election in the news was related to positive changes in expectations. Only for dynamics in campaign evaluations we see a significant influence of media favorability (supporting H1). This is outweighed, however, by the impact of having seen election news. Independent of favorability of the news, just having seen news about the election contributed to more positive assessments of the Obama campaign.

All in all, for McCain to gain more positive public assessments favorable media coverage was of great importance. For Obama it was largely sufficient if people were attentive and exposed to U.S. election news.
These differences can potentially be explained by the general opinion and media climate, which was very positive towards Obama. No matter where or when Dutch citizens’ would have seen or read about the U.S. election, chances are that they received rather positive news about Obama. For liking Obama, people just needed to be exposed, full stop. This finding dovetails with recent studies on the impact of the information environment for forming attitudes and voting preferences (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Hopmann et al., 2010). Finally, and in line with our argumentation we find no evidence of selective exposure effects. Prior preferences for one or the other candidate did not translate into selecting news channels that were more favorable towards that candidate.

Two, potentially interrelated, limitations of this study need to be addressed. Our individual-level change models resulted in very low explained variance scores. This has to do with the fact that we assess opinion change on the individual-level. Overall, there was little change in both dependent variables, with the vast majority of the respondents remaining more positive about Obama’s performance and chances to win. In this case, it is hard to predict when change does occur. So whereas theoretically a nondomestic election race provides a good framework to investigate media effects, specifically for the 2008 campaign media coverage was less likely to produce large effects from the outset. We emphasize that even though the outcome variables were rather stable we could contribute portions of the change that there was to media portrayals.

Moreover, we only included mass media information related variables as explanatory factors in our models. Since we were interested in opinion dynamics, we refrained from explaining campaign assessments or expectations directly with a host of other potentially relevant variables, but focus on changes in these assessments. These rather short-term dynamics should largely be dependent on new information reaching the individual. As argued above, the most likely source of information about an event in a foreign country are the mass media. We would have liked to include other measures of information sources as well, such as for instance interpersonal communication about the campaign, but these data are not available in this study.

Prior studies of the coverage of U.S. elections outside the U.S. show that these races generally are considered very newsworthy and therefore create a lot of media attention (Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2010). Although the 2008 ‘Obama election’ was an example of a very visible race, our study nonetheless not only contributes to an understanding of assessments of foreign leaders, but also to a more general understanding of campaign dynamics.
Appendix A

Table A1
Comparison of Sample and Dutch Population Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)(a)</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)(a)</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)(a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to NOS news(b)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>18.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>broadcast: 1.022.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>broadcast: 1.673.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to RTL news(b)</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>838.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading De Volkskrant(c)</td>
<td>0.33 (4)</td>
<td>263.204 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading NRC Handelsblad(c)</td>
<td>0.30 (5)</td>
<td>218.321 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading de Telegraaf(c)</td>
<td>0.93 (2)</td>
<td>695.635 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Algemeen Dagblad(c)</td>
<td>0.62 (3)</td>
<td>460.722 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading free newspaper(c)</td>
<td>1.29 (1)</td>
<td>1.330.204 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. \(a\)Population data from Statistics Netherlands (CBS, www.cbs.nl), based on October 2008, only people older than 18 years are included. \(b\)Population data from Dutch Audience Research Foundation (SKO, www.kijkonderzoek.nl). Exposure NOS news and RTL news based on a random day in the research period (Wednesday, September 17, 2008). \(c\)Population data are circulation numbers from Institute for Media Auditing (HOI, www.hoi-online.nl).

References


**Biographical Notes**

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