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## **The Voice of the People in the News**

### **A Content Analysis of Public Opinion Displays in Routine and Election News**

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## **The Voice of the People in the News**

### **A Content Analysis of Public Opinion Displays in Routine and Election News**

*Reporting on public opinion is an important task of journalists in democracies. There are several ways in which journalists can portray public opinion: (1) opinion polls (2) inferences to public opinion (3) vox pops (4) covering protest and (5) social media references. These public opinion displays vary in how explicitly they refer to public opinion, how representative they are of the larger population and how active the role of citizens is. Based on an extensive content analysis of all public opinion displays in Flemish print and television news, this paper analyzes when and how public opinion is represented in the news and under which circumstances which representations are more likely to be used. Our results show that in routine news, journalists most often turn to general inferences to public opinion in print news and vox pops in television news. Elections strongly influence how public opinion is portrayed in the news, with a large increase in the reporting of polls. However, more implicit public opinion displays based on journalists' own interpretation of news events still comprise a significant part of public opinion coverage.*

**KEYWORDS:** Content Analysis; Election news; Polls; Print News; Public Opinion, Television News

Reporting on public opinion has always been an important task of news media in democracies. In these times of growing political polarization and civic disengagement, it might be more important than ever before (Foa & Mounk, 2017). References to public opinion help journalists to legitimize their reporting and audiences to interpret events and learn what others in their population think about news issues (Gunther, 1998; Mutz, 1992; Patterson, 2007). Ideally, the news would reflect the diversity of opinions present in the public sphere to enable informed choices among the citizenry. However, presenting public opinion is complex, as it is very hard to grasp “the” sentiment among an entire population (Key, 1961; Schultz, 1998). Furthermore, talking about public opinion always entails a simplification of reality and a journalist’s or newsroom’s interpretation of an issue might play a role in shaping a news item (Lewis et al., 2005). Previous studies found that journalists indeed rely on their own assumptions when reporting on public opinion (King & Schudson, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Jerre, 2013). Media representations of public opinion almost always are socially constructed representations that are limited by the methods used and the journalists interpreting them. Yet, how journalists depict public opinion matters, as it has been found to influence citizens’ perceptions and judgments (Burstein, 2003; Gunther, 1998; McCombs, 2002; Mutz, 1992).

In recent years, news media were widely criticized of misrepresenting public opinion on political issues such as Brexit and the 2016 U.S. elections. Yet, we know little about when and how journalists actually portray citizen opinions in the news. Polls often get most of the attention, but journalists have several ways in which they can portray public opinion, varying in explicitness, representativeness, but also in how active the depicted citizens are. Based on the literature (e.g. Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005; Mutz, 1992), we distinguish five categories: opinion polls, general inferences to public opinion, vox pops, protest coverage and social media references. While studies exist focusing on one of these five public opinion displays, little is known about their overall frequency in the news. The main goals of this paper are to analyze both how public opinion is represented in the news and under which circumstances which representations are more likely to be used.

The first factor we focus on is print versus television news. Are different public opinion displays used to portray public opinion on different media platforms? Secondly, the origin of the news (domestic or foreign) will be incorporated in our analysis. Thirdly, we are interested in differences between news topics. Studies on public opinion displays found that their prevalence varies based on subject, and found particularly large differences between politicized and non-politicized news topics (e.g. Brookes et al., 2004, Lewis et al., 2005). Public opinion is expected to play a more important role in political news, as the media play a vital role in holding politicians accountable by pointing out which policies have public support and which do not (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Moreover, we focus explicitly on elections, as they are the most direct and active expression of public opinion. It is mainly by casting a vote that citizens can influence government and political processes.

In sum, this paper explores the diverse means through which public opinion is portrayed in Flemish (Belgian) print and television news in routine and election periods. *Every* reference to public opinion in the news, whether implicit or explicit, is analyzed for this paper. First, we construct a classification of public opinion displays and discuss how they vary on different dimensions. Second, we provide a complete understanding of when and how public opinion is represented in the news, and which factors influence which public opinion displays are reported on.

### **Displays of Public Opinion**

Mass media and public opinion have always been closely intertwined. With the emergence of mass media, it became easier than ever before for audiences to be informed on the opinions of others in their population (Deuze, 2005). Before going into detail on the different public opinion displays, we first need to address our conceptualization of public opinion, as many different interpretations and operationalizations exist. In this paper we analyze how journalists portray public opinion in the news, so the public opinion referred to is a mediatized public opinion. As mentioned above, it is questionable whether there even exists something like “the” opinion of the public, as reality is often complex, nuanced and continuously evolving. Representations of public opinion in the media are by definition the interpretation of journalists. Public opinion here mostly is an aggregation of individual opinions, presented in terms of majority and minority viewpoints (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Page & Shapiro, 1993). Despite the difficulties related to reporting on public opinion, many journalists perceive reporting public views on news topics as one of their main tasks (Berry, 2013) and they feel confident in their capacities to do so (Jerre, 2013). References to “the public” are thus expected to be ubiquitous in the news.

Journalists have several methods at hand to depict public opinion. We distinguish five different types of public opinion displays, mainly based on the classification put forward by Lewis and colleagues (2005). In their study of 2001 news coverage, they identified four broad categories of displays of public opinion: vox pops, protests, (unspecified) inferences and public opinion polls. However, in more recent news coverage, journalists have new means at their disposal to learn about public opinion and the relationship between journalists, political elites and the public has changed (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014; Hermida, 2013). This is why we identify a fifth category of social media references to public opinion.

*Opinion polls* are possibly the most visible displays of public opinion and scholarly research of media coverage of public opinion has focused extensively on polls (e.g. Hardmeier, 2008; Marsh, 1985; Moy & Rinke, 2012). Two broad categories of polls in the news exist: issue polls (e.g. on a specific issue such as traffic infrastructure or the European Union) and electoral polls. These electoral polls or “horse

race polls” are polls in which members of the public are surveyed about their choices in the next election.

*Inferences about public opinion* are the most casual references to public opinion. They are subtle invocations of public opinion through off-the-cuff and often unsubstantiated assertions about the attitude of the public made by news anchors, reporters or other actors such as politicians. These claims about the public sentiment are often made without supporting evidence and are difficult to verify (e.g. “*The French do not agree with the policy*”).

*Vox pops*, interviews with ordinary people on the street representing the general public, are one of the most common ways in which citizens are represented in television news specifically (Lewis et al., 2005). For example, vox pops were found to be present in almost eighty percent of television newscasts in Flanders in 2013 (Beckers, Walgrave, & Van den Bulck, 2018) and made up almost half of all audience displays in Spanish television news in the period 2010-2016 (Bergillos, 2019). Although often perceived as just an “embellishment” to the news, they are found to depict public opinion frequently (Beckers et al., 2018).

Lewis et al. (2005) showed that *protests* were rather uncommon in US and UK print and television news (around two percent of all public opinion displays). However, we expect that things might have changed over the past two decades, as evidence of a growth in and normalization of protests across the globe has stimulated the theoretical discussion of a “movement society” with some arguing that demonstrations are becoming a standard feature of democratic politics (Dodson, 2015; Youngs, 2019). It can be expected that the presence of more and bigger protests in real-life will result in more media attention to protests (Wouters, 2013).

*Social media* such as Twitter and Facebook make it easier than ever before for citizens to express their opinions and for others to access them. Next to new possibilities for citizens to directly engage with elites, it also opens up opportunities for journalists to report on citizen opinions. To a certain extent, social media references to public opinion overlap with the other displays; “outrage on Twitter” is comparable to traditional inferences, individual Tweets or Facebook reactions can be compared to vox pops (Beckers & Harder, 2016) and studies already focused on polls based on social media analysis (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014). Paulussen and Harder (2014) found that 43% of social media references were used to refer to public opinion in Belgian newspapers. In a content analysis of 2016 US election news, McGregor (2019) found that despite social media users do not reflect the general public, the press reported online sentiments and trends as a form of broader public opinion.

### **Dimensions of Public Opinion Displays**

The different public opinion displays vary on several dimensions visualized in Table 1. They range in the explicitness of their link to public opinion, their representativeness of the broader population,

but also in how active/passive the role of the public is. Of course, these dimensions are based on a theoretical typology, as public opinion displays belonging to the same category could also differ from each other (e.g. polls of low methodological quality could score low for representativeness).

*[Table 1 around here]*

*EXPLICITNESS OF PUBLIC OPINION DISPLAY* — The displays differ in how overtly they claim to be a portrayal of public opinion. For this dimension, we follow the classification put forward by Zerback, Koch, and Krämer (2015), who distinguished between implicit and explicit displays of public opinion. Explicit cues refer to content that directly describes prevailing opinion distributions or proportions in society. Polls are the most explicit references to public opinion. Journalists depict citizen opinions in charts, tables, or report them in written or spoken form. Implicit cues are all public opinion displays for which audiences need to interpret the climate of opinion themselves. Protests and vox pops can be categorized as implicit displays, as the audience has to establish the cognitive link that these are representations of public opinion and interpret the results. (Social media) inferences can be both implicit and explicit depending on their characteristics; in some cases the news explicitly refers to statements on public opinion being for or against an issue, while in other instances inferences might be more vague and implicit.

*REPRESENTATIVENESS*— Ideally, polls provide journalists with the most objective and verifiable source of information on public opinion. Well-conducted polls are often based on large samples, making them more representative and providing the most systematic check of journalists' instincts of the public sentiment (Herbst, 1998; Moy & Rinke, 2012). However, polls are also often accused of being biased and invalid. Yet, for all their limits, they still are the most systematic way of finding out what citizens think about issues. Vox pops, on the other hand, construct an idea of representativeness in the heads of the public, as they appear to be a randomly-selected sample of the population (Bosch, 2014). However, although audiences perceive them as representative of the entire population, they are not a very valid measure of public opinion as they portray only a small selection of interviews (and this selection is often biased). Protests often do not carry this image of representativeness, as they mostly reveal the existence of different perspectives. Even a large-scale protest can also be seen as an attempt to go against civil society or the "status quo". In all, most of the time protests are not a representative depiction of public opinion, as they focus on one side of an issue. Inferences score very low for representativeness as they are unsubstantiated claims about public opinion and not based on objective evidence. Their source and reliability remain unclear (Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). Lastly, the representativeness of social media references is problematic, as social media often have a specific

user base, which makes them highly non-representative of the general public, although they are often presented as if they are (McGregor, 2019; Mellon & Prosser, 2017).

LEVEL OF ACTIVITY OF CITIZENRY— Protests are by far the most active expressions of public opinion (either proactive or reactive), as the initiative lies with citizens (Dalton, 2013). The goal of most protests is to turn active citizen opinions into a news event, and thereby put pressure on policy makers (Giugni, 2004). In vox pop interviews, citizens get the opportunity to voice their opinion in their own words, so in a sense, they are one of the most direct portrayals of citizen opinions. However, the journalist decides who to approach and which citizens eventually make it into the news to have their say. Although polls are the most explicit displays of public opinion, they also are not initiated by citizens themselves. Citizens here get the opportunity to express their view, but the initiative lies with the polling agency. Contrary to vox pops, polls do make it harder for journalists to select opinions, as they are dependent on the poll results. This is not the case with public opinion inferences, as here the activity lies completely on the side of the actor making the inference (e.g. the journalist or politician). Citizens are only represented as a broad, vaguely described group, so no opinions can be traced back to individuals. With social media references, citizens are in general quite active, as the journalists report on opinions that citizens actively expressed on these platforms.

To conclude, for most public opinion displays much power still lies with journalists as they decide which ones eventually make it into the news coverage. So even when citizens are very actively expressing their point of view by participating in or organizing a protest, if their actions do not make it in the news, it is difficult for their voices to be heard by fellow citizens and elites, who are often the actors they want to communicate to.

### **Factors Influencing the Presence of Public Opinion Displays**

One of the goals of this paper is getting a better understanding of which factors play a role in how journalists portray public opinion in the news. First, we expect differences based on type of media platform, i.e. between print and television news. Some public opinion displays fit specific media platforms better than others. We expect vox pops, for instance, to appear more frequently in television news compared to print news, as their visual cues (i.e. the interviews with ordinary persons portrayed in public spaces such as shopping streets) are expected to be quite important (Beckers, 2017). Indeed, Lewis et al. (2005) found vox pops to be ubiquitous in US and UK television news, while they were almost absent in print news. Protests are often also quite visual in nature, so we expect them to be more common in television news (Small, 1994). Consequently, especially visual public opinion displays such as vox pops and protest might have a higher chance to make it into television news compared to print news. For the other public opinion displays, we do not expect media type to affect their presence in the news as much.



***H1a.*** *Vox pops have a higher chance to be reported on in television news compared to print news*

***H1b.*** *Protests have a higher chance to be reported on in television news compared to print news*

A second factor we investigate is the origin of the public opinion displays. More and more news has a domestic focus (Wouters & De Swert, 2009), so it seems logical that the majority of public opinion displays is also domestic. Moreover, several studies found journalists to look at their own direct environment to shape their ideas on audience opinions, and to sometimes even reject external public opinion sources (Entman & Paletz, 1981; Gans, 1979; Jerre, 2013). We therefore expect that journalists report on public opinion more when they have direct experience with it. Additionally, foreign news has been found to be framed by elites more often compared to domestic news, with less room for citizen voices (Hayes & Guardino, 2010). For these reasons we hypothesize that public opinion displays in general have a higher chance to appear in domestic news coverage.

***H2.*** *Public opinion displays in general have a higher chance to be reported on in domestic news compared to foreign news*

Third, we investigate whether specific public opinion displays are linked to specific news topics. For example, several studies found that polls are used mostly for more serious—often political—news topics (e.g. Brookes et al., 2004). Beckers et al. (2018) found that vox pops are used in a wide range of news topics, but most commonly in news on politics, social affairs and mobility. Social media references would be used more for soft news topics such as entertainment and culture, although they also seem quite common in hard news topics such as politics, conflict and elections (e.g. McGregor, 2019; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Few studies compared all these displays of public opinion directly. Lewis et al. (2005) did, and found all displays of public opinion to be most prevalent in politicized news topics. However, this might be influenced by the specific time period they studied (September-October 2001 with 9/11 and the following war in Afghanistan). This study will be the first systematic account of public opinion displays using constructed news weeks, enabling an analysis of which displays occur in which topics, which is why we formulate a research question.

***RQ1.*** *Does news topic influence which public opinion displays are reported on in the news?*

Elections are events in which citizens are able to express their opinions very explicitly. Previous research focused on public opinion displays during elections, but hardly any research compared election and routine news directly. Election campaigns are expected to influence how journalists and

citizens interact as citizens become more interested and involved in the political process (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). We consequently expect public opinion itself to become more newsworthy in election times, as journalists might reflect this more important and central role of citizens. We believe that the share of polls in particular will be higher in election compared to non-election news coverage. Polls are the most explicit display of public opinion and the results lie closest to election outcomes. When election campaigns are nearing their peak, an "obsession to forecast" becomes evident, making polls more newsworthy and prominent (Weimann, 1990). Moreover, high-quality, representative polls are expensive and for this reason might be more unlikely to be commissioned outside election times. Several studies indeed found a large share of polls in election news coverage. Brookes et al. (2004) studied public opinion representations in television news (*BBC & ITV*) during the 2001 UK elections and found that polls made up 33% percent of all public opinion displays. Clear differences can be noticed with similar research focusing on routine periods, where polls made out only 1.8% of public opinion displays in UK news coverage (Lewis et al., 2004). Other studies found similar results (see, for instance: Larsen and Fazekas, 2020; Welch, 2002). However, next to public opinion becoming more explicit during election campaigns, we also expect that citizens become more active, as issues coming from mobilizations are potentially more likely to be heard during election campaigns (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). We thus hypothesize coverage of protests to be more common in election news.

***H3.** Public opinion displays in general have a higher chance to be reported on in election news compared to non-election news*

***H3a.** Opinion polls have a higher chance to be reported on in election news compared to non-election news*

***H3b.** Protests have a higher chance to be reported on in election news compared to non-election news*

## **Method**

To gain a complete picture of how public opinion is portrayed in the news, a manual content analysis of all public opinion displays in four constructed news weeks in Flemish print and television media was conducted. Manual coding was necessary, as not all displays of public opinion are explicit and searching for keywords would miss more subtle information.

Three constructed weeks of news (Monday-Saturday) were selected from the period January - June 2018, a routine news period outside an election campaign. 2947 news items were coded in this period. Additionally, one week was constructed from the month before the federal, regional and European elections of May 26, 2019. During this election period, 947 news items were coded. As we are interested in general patterns in the representation of public opinion in the news and as our focus

lies on the level of the news item, we believe including one constructed week of election news is sufficient for our analyses. We opted to work with constructed weeks to ensure that our data were not interfered by big news events that might have occurred during specific news weeks. Moreover, constructed weeks avoid the possibility of oversampling specific news days.

Data were collected in Flanders, characterized by a “democratic corporatist” model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Next to a strong public service broadcaster, only one commercial broadcaster with a primetime newscast exists and newspapers have become non-partisan. For the newspapers, we selected the main popular (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) and elite newspaper (*De Standaard*). In the constructed weeks all articles that appeared in the print versions of the newspapers were coded; with the exception of regional pages, the separate sports section and weather forecasts. All newspapers have an identical main news section (also containing news from different regions), and a separate regional section that is unique for all regions. Articles in the regional sections of the newspapers were excluded for reasons of comparability and as they contain hyperlocal news solely focused on the population of small communities (e.g. someone becoming 100 years old). 1435 news items were coded from *De Standaard*, 1485 news items from *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

For television news, the two main (and only) 7 pm evening news broadcasts were coded: “Het Journaal 19h” from public service broadcaster *Eén* and “Het Nieuws” from commercial broadcaster *VTM*. Both newscasts are among the most watched prime time television programs and compete for audience share (CIM, 2020). In total, 365 news items were coded from *Eén*, which contained on average 18.9 news items per day ( $SD = 6.5$ ); 609 news items from *VTM* which contained on average 27.9 news items per day ( $SD = 3.7$ ).

To get a comprehensive understanding of public opinion displays in the news, an extensive codebook was generated. Next to the date and media platform, for every news item, the title, subtitle and origin (domestic versus foreign) of the news was coded. In our sample, 73.2% of the news was domestic and 26.9% foreign; Krippendorff's alpha = 0.75. Issue topic was coded based on the topic codebook of the comparative agenda's project (CAP, see [www.comparativeagendas.net/belgium](http://www.comparativeagendas.net/belgium)). Every news item could receive up to three issue codes, in order of importance; Krippendorff's alpha = 0.82. If a news item referred explicitly to the federal, regional or European elections of May 26, 2019, this was coded in a dummy variable. In 2018, 1.0% of the news items referred to the elections, compared to 20.3% in 2019, demonstrating a clear difference between the two time periods.

This basic coding was conducted for all news items. If no public opinion displays were present, coding stopped here. If a news item contained one or more public opinion displays, these were coded more thoroughly. All references to public opinion in a news item were classified into one of five categories, Krippendorff's alpha = 0.88:

- (1) *Public opinion poll*. Survey measuring the public's views regarding a particular topic. A distinction is made between issue polls (polls on a specific topic) and election polls. Opinion polls were only included if they covered attitudes, not behaviors.
- (2) *Inferences to public opinion*. Statements that infer public opinion without supporting evidence. All references to any form of public opinion, including those made by actors speaking in the news (e.g. experts or politicians).
- (3) *Vox pop*. Interview with an apparently randomly chosen ordinary individual without organizational affiliation who conveys his/her opinion in a news item.
- (4) *Protest*. Reference to every form of protest in the news. Each protest is coded separately, so a protest and counter-protest mentioned in the same news item are coded as separate public opinion displays.
- (5) *Social media reference*. Reference to public opinion using social media. A combination of all of the foregoing, when public opinion is portrayed in any way through social media.

This codebook was tested extensively and after a satisfactory pretest (Krippendorff's alpha > 0.70 for all variables), five coders coded all news items. Some public opinion displays were relatively easy to identify as they are distinctive and always have more or less the same format (e.g. protests, opinion polls, vox pops). The biggest challenge of the coding process were the inferences to public opinion, as they are a crucial part of public opinion representation, but sometimes rather subtle. This is why *all* news items were coded twice. This was time-consuming, yet crucial for the quality of the data. During the second round of coding, an additional 12% of public opinion displays were identified, mostly inferences to public opinion. By paying this much attention to the quality of the coding process, we are rather confident that we satisfactorily identified all public opinion displays in the news.

## Results

### When Is Public Opinion Represented in the News?

Altogether, 18.6% (N = 725) of all analyzed news items contained one or more displays of public opinion, resulting in a total of 1217 displays. In Table 2, a logistic regression analysis with a dummy variable for the presence (1) or absence (0) of a public opinion display as dependent variable is included to investigate which factors influence their presence in the news more systematically.

[Table 2 around here]

First, we find that public opinion displays have a higher chance to appear in television news compared to print news (OR = 1.27,  $p < 0.01$ ). Looking at the number of news items containing one or

more public opinion displays, we see that the difference is relatively small between print (18.4%) and television news (19.3%). However, on average there are more public opinion displays per news item in television ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) compared to print news ( $M = 1.62$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ );  $t(310) = -2.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . We are also interested in differences in the presence of public opinion displays based on media type (commercial vs. public service and popular vs. elite). More items on the public service broadcaster (25.5%) contain one or more public opinion displays compared to the commercial broadcaster (15.6%),  $t(913) = 6.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . A similar result is found for the newspapers: almost twice the amount of articles in the elite newspaper (23.3%) contain public opinion displays compared to the popular newspaper (13.0%),  $t(3201) = 12.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

In Table 2 we also see that the origin of the news item (domestic or foreign) plays a role in whether public opinion is reported on or not. Against our expectations (H2), public opinion has a higher chance to be reported on in foreign compared to domestic news ( $OR = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Looking closer at the number of news items containing one or more public opinion displays, we find that number to be higher for foreign news (22.5%) compared to domestic news (17.3%),  $t(1570) = 3.45$ ;  $p < 0.001$ .

The third factor we explore is news topic, for which we include dummy variables per issue with “politics” as reference category. The only news topic in which public opinion displays are more likely to appear compared to politics (national politics & governmental affairs) is civil rights and liberties (e.g. LGBTQ rights, women’s rights or racism), as all other issues have negative coefficients compared to the political news dummy. In Table 3, we further explore the presence of public opinion displays per issue. Here we see similar patterns: next to civil rights and liberties, journalists frequently refer to public opinion in political news and in news on foreign affairs and development aid, which is also highly politicized.

*[Table 3 around here]*

The strongest predictor in Table 2 is the election news dummy ( $OR = 4.103$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Public opinion displays are more than four times more likely to appear in election news compared to non-election news. These results are in line with our third hypothesis. Looking at the share of news items containing one or more public opinion displays, we see that while in non-election news, 16.70% of the news items contains one or more displays of public opinion, in election news this rises to 49.12%,  $t(243) = -9.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

### **How is Public Opinion Represented in the News?**

Not only are we interested in the general presence of public opinion in the news, but also in how public opinion is displayed under various circumstances. In Table 4, we explore the share of the

different public opinion displays as compared to all identified public opinion displays. Although scholarly work has focused mostly on polls, they are not the most frequent display of public opinion. However, large differences exist between the two time periods. Both in print and television news, the presence of polls more than triples in 2019. In both years, general inferences are by far the most frequent public opinion display in print news. In 2018, more than seven out of ten references to public opinion in the newspapers are general inferences. In the election year 2019, they are less common at the advantage of opinion polls. In television news, they make up a little less than thirty percent of the public opinion displays in both time periods. Inferences allow journalists to interpret and explain events or trends. Examples are: “Many people consider statements like that to be racist” *VTM*, 15/01/2018; “The people demand a straightforward policy and fast results”, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 13/05/2019; “The ordinary Frenchman doesn’t trust Macron”, *De Standaard*, 05/05/2018). The biggest difference between print and television news exists for vox pops; while they are almost absent in print news, they are the main public opinion display in television news. Half of the displays in television news items are vox pops in both periods. Protests comprise around ten percent of the public opinion displays and there do not seem to be large differences between the two time periods. Interestingly, social media references (e.g. “That contrast unleashed a storm of protest on social media”, *De Standaard*, 18/05/2018) remain relatively uncommon in both print and television news compared to the other public opinion displays.

[Table 4 around here]

To predict which factors determine how public opinion is portrayed in the news, we conduct logistic regression analyses with the presence (1) or absence (0) of the different public opinion displays as dependent variables. The results can be found in Table 5.

Opinion polls have a higher chance to appear in print than in television news (OR = 0.31,  $p < 0.001$ ). There are relatively more polls in foreign news compared to items covering domestic news (OR = 0.54;  $p < 0.01$ ). This might be because polls are a relatively objective way for journalists to report on foreign public opinion with which they have less experience to interpret the public sentiment. There are more polls in election year 2019 compared to routine year 2018, regardless of whether a news item is directly linked to the elections. So during the election campaign there are more opinion polls in all types of news. Additionally, polls have an even higher chance to make it into the news when an item directly refers to the elections, which is the strongest predictor of the presence of a poll in a news item (OR = 4.57;  $p < 0.001$ ), and consistent with Hypothesis 3a. Being interested in those large differences between election and non-election news, for every poll we determine whether it is an election poll or an issue poll. While polls in routine news are almost exclusively issue polls (80.0%), with only 20.0%

election polls, in election times the large majority of the polls are—unsurprisingly—election polls (87.3%), talking about the popularity of political parties or politicians. Regarding topics, polls are almost consistently more common in political news compared to other news topics.

Like polls, inferences have a higher chance to appear in print news ( $OR = 0.43, p < 0.001$ ) and are found relatively more frequently in foreign news ( $OR = 0.53, p < 0.001$ ). Journalists thus seem to use more inferences to public opinion when covering news from abroad, often to describe the general sentiment in the country in which the news event occurs. Contrarily to the findings for polls, general inferences to public opinion are more common in routine year 2018 compared to election year 2019 ( $OR = 0.53, p < 0.001$ ). They do have a higher chance to appear in election news ( $OR = 2.63; p < 0.001$ ), in line with the general increase of public opinion displays in election news we saw above. Regarding topic, we see that they have a higher chance to appear in political news compared to many other news topics, although not all differences are significant.

For vox pops we find different results from the ones of the two abovementioned public opinion displays. In line with our first hypothesis (H1a), vox pops have a significantly higher chance to make it in television news compared to print news; being 15 times more likely to appear in television news ( $OR = 15.11, p < 0.001$ ). Contrary to most of the other public opinion displays, vox pops are more common in domestic news ( $OR = 1.93; p < 0.01$ ). This is not surprising, as journalists physically need to go onto the streets to conduct the interviews, which is more difficult for foreign news. Vox pops have a higher chance to make it into the news in the election year 2019 ( $OR = 1.52; p < 0.05$ ), but not into news items linked to the elections specifically ( $OR = 1.28; p > 0.05$ ). Journalists thus seem to go onto the streets more often during the election campaign, but not necessarily to ask citizens' opinion on the elections themselves. Vox pops have a higher chance to appear in news on economy and civil rights and liberties compared to politics.

Similarly to vox pops, protests appear relatively more frequently in television news. However, the effect is not significant ( $OR = 1.44; p > 0.05$ ), so we have to reject hypothesis 1b. There is more protest coverage in foreign news compared to domestic news ( $OR = 15.11, p < 0.001$ ). Against our expectations, there is not more protest coverage in election news or during the election year. It is consequently not the case that journalists pay more attention to citizens actively voicing public opinion during the election campaign, rejecting hypothesis 3b. Protests are most common in news items about civil right and liberties ( $OR = 8.65, p < 0.001$ ).

As seen in Table 4, social media references are still quite uncommon in both television and print news. We do find that they seem to play a larger role in coverage of elections, as they are five times more likely to appear in election news ( $OR = 5.19, p < 0.01$ ). They are most prevalent in less politicized news topics such as culture & entertainment and faits divers. In news on civil rights and liberties they also have a higher chance to be used compared to political news.

*[Table 5 around here]*

### **Conclusion & Discussion**

Using a content analysis of *all* displays of public opinion in Flemish news, we were able to get a unique understanding of when and how journalists portray public opinion, focusing on public opinion displays varying in explicitness, representativeness and activeness of the citizenry. We find that journalists seem to take their responsibility to speak about—or on behalf of—the public quite serious: almost twenty percent of all news items contained one or more references to public opinion and for political news this was more than one in three news items. Public opinion seems to be most newsworthy during elections: almost half of the news items covering elections refer to public opinion in one way or another. An interesting finding was the higher number of public opinion displays on the public service broadcaster and in the elite newspaper compared to their commercial and popular counterparts. A possible explanation is that the elite newspaper and public service broadcaster attach more importance to what is often referred to as the “watchdog” role of journalism, focusing on holding politicians accountable and basing their coverage on what citizens think or need, which could result in more coverage of public opinion (Schultz, 1998; Silverstone, 2013).

It thus seems that journalists feel some sort of commitment to report on public opinion—particularly during election campaigns—and also feel capable of doing so. Citizens seem to have little control over this process, however. Proactive expressions of public opinion taking place in the real world are rarely covered; protests only play a minimal role in the media representation of public opinion and are covered even less frequently in election news. There are differences between media platforms for which public opinion displays did make it into the news regularly: the most common displays are vox pops for television and general inferences (claims without supporting evidence) for print news. These two types of public opinion displays give journalists quite some leeway in how to cover public opinion. For vox pops, journalists themselves indicate that they search for opinions that fit a news story and they usually have a fairly clear idea of which opinions they are looking for (Beckers, 2017). General inferences are even more dependent on the assumptions of journalists, as they are always an interpretation of public opinion. The most explicit and representative displays of public opinion such as polls are less common, especially in routine news. Election periods influence how public opinion is portrayed in the news, however. During elections, the focus seems to shift to horse race coverage with a large increase in polls. Yet, even in election times, general inferences and vox pops compose a significant part of public opinion reporting.

It consequently seems important that journalists have an idea of what citizens think and want. However, previous research (Beckers, Walgrave, Wolf, Lamot, & Van Aelst, 2019; Jerre, 2013) revealed that this is not always the case in reality, i.e. when comparing journalists’ judgements of public opinion



with real public opinion data, it has been found that journalists' perceptions are biased. Additionally, more extreme—and thus possibly more polarized—opinions are often considered to be more newsworthy, a finding confirmed by Larsen and Fazekas (2020) for poll coverage. These possible misperceptions and resulting misrepresentations of public opinion in the news by journalists are potentially consequential. Several studies already established that citizens' perceptions and judgements of public opinion are influenced by media portrayals of public opinion, including the less representative and explicit ones (Burstein, 2003; Gunther, 1998; McCombs, 2002; Mutz, 1992). So news reporting of public opinion based on journalists' own interpretations of events might result in misperceptions among the public. This is especially relevant for opinions about political issues and elections, which may have broader implications for people's ideological stance, party preference and, eventually, their vote. Furthermore, actual policy-making has been found to be influenced by (perceptions of) public opinion (e.g. Page & Shapiro, 1983).

The main challenge of this paper was the coding process. Much attention was paid to the quality of the data to ensure that all displays of public opinion were identified. The fact that we found that the implicit displays were the most common (and that this finding was similar to previous research; see Lewis et al., 2005) shows that we were able to identify them in a satisfactory manner. One of the main limitations of this study is its focus on only one media system, i.e. the Flemish one. The Flemish media market is highly advantageous for the quality of news reporting, with relatively high newspaper readership and a strong public service broadcaster, comparable to many other smaller European media markets (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Finland; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, we also have reasons to believe our results are generalizable beyond those contexts, as our findings to a large degree correspond to previous research in other countries (Lewis et al., 2005). Yet, replications in other media systems would be interesting and relevant. Additionally, we only focused on traditional news media, and did not include online news. As we already found quite some differences between the traditional media platforms, we have reasons to expect that online news platforms may differ from our findings, as for instance social media references are easier to integrate online. Moreover, we need to acknowledge that traditional media are no longer the only sources that present and spread portrayals of public opinion (McGregor, 2019; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Citizens can directly express their opinions to politicians and fellow citizens through for instance viral hashtags and online tools such as petitions.

In all, this study provides a broad understanding of how public opinion is represented in the news. It shows that journalists make claims about public opinion frequently, and most often turn to implicit references to public opinion which are mainly based on their own interpretations of what the public thinks about a certain issue. As these media representations of public opinion are not without

consequences and could potentially influence audience perceptions and judgements, they deserve more attention in academic research as well as in journalism practice.

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