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Finding perceptions of partisan news media bias in an unlikely place

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Worldwide, the traditional press is under fire. The fairness and reliability of traditional news media coverage is often visibly contested. Even in countries such as Belgium, that have a relatively impartial media system compared to other countries, we see that politicians sometimes criticize the news media for being biased, that is: disadvantaging their party or ideology while favoring their political opponents. Recently, a minister from the largest political party in Belgium for instance stated that *“Journalists would publish anything, as long as it disadvantages our party”*. Importantly, the idea of news coverage being ideologically slanted is not unique to politicians. Several studies demonstrate that a substantial amount of citizens perceive news coverage as biased (e.g. Eveland Jr & Shah, 2003; Ladd, 2010).

Pinpointing why it is that (some) citizens hold pessimistic beliefs about the news media’s objectivity is crucial, as these perceptions shape citizens’ overall trust in news media – or rather the lack thereof (see for example European Commission, 2019; Newman et al., 2020).¹ The more citizens perceive news media as slanted, research shows, the less they trust the mainstream press, the less they will consume news (McQuail, 1992; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005), and, ironically, the more they will seek out biased, partisan news media outlets instead (Ladd, 2010). The lack of trust in news media is worrisome because it reduces citizens’ willingness to accept democratic decisions (Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005). After all, for traditional media to fulfill their crucial watchdog function in society, citizens should be receptive towards the content they produce (Christians et al., 2010). And for citizens to accept and retain the information news media outlets provide, trust in these outlet is simply indispensable (e.g. Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Baum and Gussin 2008; Coe et al. 2008; Liebes and Ribak, 1991). Although perceived partisan media bias is not the only source of antipathy towards the press (see Ladd, 2010 for a more elaborate overview), it constitutes an important determinant of citizens’ trust in the news. It is therefore not surprising that citizens’ perceptions of news media bias have

¹ Only half of Belgian citizens trust the news and in many countries this percentage is even lower (Newman et al., 2020).

received a good deal of scholarly attention over the years (e.g. Watts et al., 1999; Lee, 2005; Gunther and Schmitt, 2004).

One explanation for the skeptical attitude of both citizens and politicians vis-à-vis news media might simply be the fact that their coverage *is actually* ideologically slanted (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). However, even in an isolated experimental context in which citizens get to read a perfectly balanced news item, they appear to perceive this content as biased (Hansen & Kim, 2011). In their seminal work, Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) identified the finding that people with different political orientations assess the exact same news content differently, and, more specifically, that they perceive news content as disadvantaging their own opinions while favoring opposing views, as the *hostile media phenomenon*. Specifically, they show that pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans perceived the exact same television item about the Beirut massacre as biased in favor of 'the other side'. Over the years, many scholars have followed in their footsteps and, in a variety of different contexts, confirmed that most people tend to perceive balanced news items as biased, and that the direction of this bias goes against one's own party, ideology or viewpoint (see Hansen & Kim, 2011 for an overview of studies on the hostile media phenomenon). Interestingly, even with regard news coverage that is actually slanted or opinionated, partisanship significantly predicts citizens' perceptions of bias. Confronted with a news item that favors the own party, partisans still perceive it as less favorable to their own position than their opponents (Feldman, 2011). This has often been labelled the *relative* hostile media phenomenon (see also Dalton et al., 1998; Gunther, 1992). The fact that experimental work shows how partisans perceive the same news content differently, implies that both simply cannot be right.

Outside of a controlled experimental setting, however, partisans do not necessarily consume the exact same news content. People, just as they like to interact with like-minded citizens, turn to seemingly like-minded news media outlets and, especially if news outlets have a distinct political

orientation, are therefore not necessarily exposed to the same news content (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Barnidge et al., 2020 or see Shah et al., 2017 who demonstrate that which media one consumes strongly determines which content one is exposed to). Given that the theory of selective exposure posits that citizens consume news that confirms their pre-existing ideas, we would on the one hand expect citizens to positively evaluate news content produced by the outlet they voluntarily choose as their main source of (political) information. Indeed, research shows that content produced by a ‘friendly’ news source is less likely to provoke hostile media perceptions (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Reid, 2012; Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Barnidge et al., 2020). On the other hand, though, the hostile media phenomenon – the fact that people tend to perceive bias even when there is none to be found – could be so strong that citizens perceive bias in any news media outlet, even their favorite one. So the question is; does the hostile media phenomenon hold when we take into account that citizens are selective in which news media they consume?

Building on the established hostile media literature, this paper breaks new ground by doing three things. First, in contrast to the abundant experimental research, we study citizens’ perceptions of partisan news media bias in the real world (see Eberl, 2019 for a similar approach). Second, we ask respondents to indicate to what extent various parties are *generally* treated (un)favorably by a news outlet, instead of focusing on one particular news item or topic (e.g. Art & Wolling, 2016). Finally, and most importantly, we put the hostile media phenomenon to a conservative test. For one, we study the phenomenon in Belgium, a consensual multiparty democracy with a news media environment that, in comparative perspective, is relatively non-partisan – which makes it a least likely context to find perceptions of partisan bias in the first place. In addition, we study citizens’ perceptions of news coverage produced by the outlet they most often consume, which, because of selective exposure, should reduce the likelihood that citizens will perceive this outlet to be biased against their views (Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Arceneaux et al., 2012). If we confirm the hostile media phenomenon when taking into account that a person’s perception of the ideological congruence with

a news outlet determines whether or not they use the outlet in the first place, the normative implications are even greater than is generally assumed; even content produced by ‘friendly’ sources can then contribute to a general distrust in news media.

To examine perceptions of partisan bias in the news media, we conducted a survey among 1,190 Belgian citizens and asked them about the extent to which the news outlet they most often consume, (dis)advantages each of the Belgian Dutch-speaking parties in their coverage. We show that even when asking citizens about their favorite news outlet, citizens believe news coverage (dis)favors some parties over others. Exploring which citizens perceive the news media as biased, we find that those who have outspoken partisan preferences, have a low level of trust in democracy, and a high level of political interest are more inclined to perceive news media as biased towards *any* party. If we subsequently zoom in on citizens’ party preference as an explanation for their perceptions of news media bias, our findings confirm the hostile media phenomenon: most citizens believe the news outlet disadvantages their preferred party, and favors the parties they dislike. The effect is especially pronounced for those with a strong party identify. Confirming findings from the US (e.g. Lee, 2005), we additionally find that it is mainly right-wing citizens who are prone to hold such hostile media perceptions. All in all, our findings demonstrate that citizens believe that even their preferred news outlet produces hostile news content.

How (some) citizens perceive partisan bias in the news media

When we talk about bias in the context of news reporting it refers to the opposite of balanced news coverage (McQuail, 1992). The idea of balanced (or fair, impartial) journalism relates to whether different opinions get a platform, and are more or less treated equally by the news outlet (Ryan, 2001). In the case of American politics, for example, balanced reporting requires that conservative and liberal opinions receive roughly the same amount of coverage or airtime (Covert & Wasburn, 2007) and that journalists adopt the same tone when reporting on both parties (or their ideas, members, etc.) (Niven, 2003). Overall, when we use the term news media bias, it refers to some kind of partiality in an outlet's reporting, which can both refer to a lack of qualitative (framing and tone) and quantitative (amount of coverage) balance in the news (Lee, 2005).

Research has shown that some news items (and by extent news outlets) are biased while others are not. Irrespective of this reality, however, even neutral and balanced news reports, developed in the context of experimental research, are by many citizens perceived as biased (Perloff, 1989; Vallone et al., 1985). The fact that citizens' perceptions of media bias are at least partially unfounded, has prompted researchers to examine variation in perceived partisan bias between citizens (Baum & Gussin, 2008). After all, variation in citizens' perceptions of news media coverage must, in this experimental context, be explained by something other than objective characteristics of the coverage itself (Eveland Jr & Shah, 2003). While most studies in this research area focus on explaining why citizens perceive coverage to be biased *against their own views* – the 'hostile media phenomenon' identified by Vallone, Ross and Lepper in 1985 – a lot less is known about how citizens evaluate coverage bias in *general*, regardless of the direction it might take. One reason for this one-sided focus is the fact that most existing research is conducted in the US two-party system. Still, we can borrow insights from the hostile media literature to argue why we expect certain citizens to perceive more *partisan news media bias in general*.

First, scholars have quite convincingly shown that the intensity of citizens' attitudes impacts their perceptions of news media bias (see Dalton et al., 1998; Gunther, 1988; Vallone et al., 1985). In particular, these studies demonstrate that it is especially citizens who feel strongly about an issue – and therefore care more about how it is covered in the news – that perceive coverage on this particular topic to be biased (Eveland Jr & Shah, 2003). Although these studies mainly focus on one specific news item, about a specific issue, we expect that a similar relationship exists when we look at citizens' perceptions of news coverage of a media outlet *in general*; citizens with a high level of political interest likely perceive more partisan bias in an entire news media outlet. One reason why politically interested are more susceptible to hold hostile media perceptions is the fact that involvement increases the likelihood that people let their prior opinions steer how they perceive and process the information they receive – so-called *biased processing* (Gunther, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 2012). Because of this biased information processing, politically involved citizens are more likely to experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with information or opinions that are counter-attitudinal, which increases the likelihood that they perceive the news media to be biased. All in all, we expect that:

H1: Perceived partisan bias in the news media will be greater for politically involved citizens.

Citizens' involvement in politics can be measured in yet another way, namely by looking at the extremity of a person's political ideology. From previous studies we know that citizens with more extreme political opinions tend to be more involved in politics – and vice versa that a higher involvement may result in more extreme opinions (Harton & Latane, 1997; Liu & Latané, 1998). Because of their higher involvement in politics, we can expect that citizen with more extreme ideological preferences will be more likely to perceive dissonant news and information to be biased. Moreover, there are two other reasons to expect a positive relation between political extremity and perceived partisan media bias. First, much of the content that appears in the mainstream news media, which by nature covers a wide range of opinions, will be discrepant from the more extreme

opinions, further fueling the idea of a ideologically biased news media (Gunther, 1988). Second, citizens with more extreme political opinions are more inclined to turn to alternative and politically slanted news media. Although this may actually mean that they have a higher trust in these alternative news outlets, it will at the same time lower their trust in mainstream news media outlets (Eberl, 2019; Ladd, 2010). For these reasons, we formulate the following expectation:

H2: Perceived partisan bias in the news media will be greater for citizens with more extreme political opinions.

Third, because the traditional press could be regarded as part of the 'establishment', we would expect perceptions of partisan media bias to be associated with citizens' overall (dis)trust in democratic institutions (including trust in parties, parliament, government, etc.). If people are skeptical about the functioning of our democracy in general, they are probably more skeptical about news organizations as well (Jones, 2004). Of course, causality is quite tricky here since scholars have shown that perceptions of media bias may as well lead to distrust in democracy (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Yet, regardless of the direction of the effect, we expect that:

H3: Perceived partisan bias in the news media will be greater for citizens who have a general distrust in democratic institutions.

Apart from the intensity and extremity of attitudes, citizens' political preferences might influence the extent and direction in which news media bias is perceived (Gunther, 1988). Indeed, research has repeatedly shown that partisanship is a strong predictor of citizens' media bias perceptions. Following in the footsteps of Vallone et al. (1985), who were the first to empirically demonstrate this so-called hostile media phenomenon, an established literature has emerged on the importance of partisanship in relation to perceptions of partisan bias. Gunther (1992) for example shows that Republicans, Democrats, but also Catholics for instance, believe that media coverage about 'their' group is significantly more negative than coverage of the other groups. Overall, empirical findings on

the hostile media phenomenon can be summarized by saying that the perceived media bias runs in a counter-attitudinal direction, that is: against a person's opinion or political group (Hansen & Kim, 2011). That citizens perceive media messages to be hostile against their own beliefs or political in-group while favoring their opponents, can be explained by distorted information processing; people are more likely to accept pro-attitudinal information and reject information that is dissonant (confirmatory bias), tend to categorize opposing and neutral content as hostile to their own position (selective categorization), and are more likely to recall opposing content than confirming content (selective memory) (see Reid, 2012; Feldman, 2011). This is why we hypothesize that:

H4a: Partisans perceive news media to be biased against their party, while they favor political opponents.

Linking back to our argumentation concerning citizens' overall perceptions of coverage bias, research suggests that it is in particular highly involved citizens or 'strong partisans' who have the tendency to perceive news coverage of an issue as biased against their own views (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). The rationale is that the group identification of strong partisans is a lot more salient, which seems to increase perceptions of news media bias (Coe et al., 2008; or see Reid, 2012 who shows that when citizens' political identity is salient, perceptions of news media bias are enhanced). This is why we expect that:

H4b: The effect of partisans perceiving news media as biased against their party is amplified when identification with the own party is stronger.

Finally, previous research has shown that conservative citizens more often feel disadvantaged by the media (e.g. Lee, 2005). Often referred to as the 'liberal media myth', conservative citizens seem to believe that journalists produce coverage that favors liberal ideas. One explanation may be that conservative elites often publicly claim that journalists are liberal (or left-wing) and these preferences affect their reporting, thereby influencing like-minded citizens (Domke et al., 1999;

Watts et al., 1999; Lee, 2005). Another reason why the perception of media bias might be more prevalent among conservatives is the fact that many topics covered in the press can potentially be perceived as rather liberal (think about coverage on climate change for example) (Lee, 2005). Even though some have made an opposite claim – arguing that the news media can just as well be perceived as reflecting more conservative opinions – American findings indeed show that Republicans, compared to Democrats, are more likely to believe news coverage is biased against ‘their side’ (e.g. Watts et al., 1999). Translating this to the Belgian multiparty context, we expect that citizens who identify themselves as right-wing² will be more susceptible to the hostile media phenomenon than center and left-wing citizens. This results in our final hypothesis:

H4c: The effect of partisans perceiving news media as biased against their party will be greater for right-wing compared to centrist or leftist citizens.

Data & Methods

This study is conducted in Belgium, more specifically in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. This context offers some unique opportunities. For one, Belgium is a multiparty system, which is very different from the often-studied United States where only two parties compete over power. Whereas in a two-party system most citizens support one party and automatically oppose the other, there is more variation in partisanship in a multiparty context. In this fragmented partisan context, with no less than seven Dutch-speaking parties represented in parliament, citizens may support or oppose multiple parties and hold a more neutral stance towards other parties. Also, there may be more variation with regard to party identification, with some citizens clearly supporting one party, and others supporting a group of left- or right-wing parties (Van der Meer et al., 2015).

² In Belgium the main cleavage is not between Liberals and Conservatives, but between left-wing and right-wing citizens/parties. Although in theory two ideological dimensions can be distinguished – economy and immigration –, in practice these two strongly overlap. In Belgium (Flanders), the liberal party (Open VLD), the right-wing regionalist party (N-VA) and the extreme right (VB) are considered to be ‘right-wing’. The parties are against a strong intervention of the state in the economy and are more critical on topics such as immigration. N-VA and VB are considered more right-wing than the Open VLD, though, since they additionally take a conservative stance on ethical issues.

Second, the Flemish³ media system is classified as Democratic-Corporatist – comparable to media systems in other Northern European countries such as Austria, The Netherlands, Germany and the Scandinavian countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2008). What distinguishes the Democratic-Corporatist model is its history of party-press parallelism. For decades, the Flemish newspaper market was characterized by external pluralism; outlets were owned by parties and journalists covered current affairs in the light of their (outlet's) ideology. However, instigated by a commercialization trend, newspapers gradually got rid of their ties with specific parties and their content became more internally diverse from the 1960s onwards. Today, the affiliation between newspapers and certain parties has disappeared; content-wise, in terms of segregation of readership and in terms of ownership (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Other than a depillarized newspaper market, the Flemish news media market is characterized by a strong mass circulation of print press, a strong journalistic professionalization – with journalistic autonomy, self-regulation and professional standards –, constitutional guarantees to protect press freedom, and a strong public service broadcast that has substantial autonomy (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). Importantly, the coverage of the public and commercial television broadcast is characterized by objectivity and impartiality (Van Aelst, 2007). All in all, commercialization trends have undermined political parallelism throughout the years – opposite to the developments in the American newspaper market (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) – which resulted in a media system in which the traditional news outlets are considered relatively non-partisan. Although we do not claim that there is zero partisan bias left, at least in a comparative perspective, the current Belgian media system is classified as relatively non-partisan. This, we believe, makes it less likely for Flemish citizens to perceive news coverage, in general, as politically slanted.

³ The Belgian media landscape mirrors its federalized political structure, with Dutch-speaking media targeting the Flemish community and French-speaking media being predominantly consumed by the French community. With news outlets divided along language lines, and different ministers in charge of media policies at both sides of the language border, we can consider the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) media system as one in its own right.

To examine citizens' perceptions of partisan news media bias, we rely on survey evidence collected in July 2019 among 1,190 Flemish citizens. Via survey company Dynata⁴ (formerly SSI) we re-contacted respondents of an earlier survey fielded in February 2018. Out of the original 2,389 participants, 1,190 were willing to participate again five months later (50% response rate). Dynata relied on a large online panel and used quota sampling on gender, age and education. By re-contacting the respondents of an earlier survey some self-selection bias is introduced in our sample; respondents are slightly higher educated, and older than the Flemish population⁵ – see Table A1 in the Supplementary information file for more information on the sample. We account for this distortion in our analysis, though, by including both citizens' educational level and age in our models as control variables and showing that it does not affect citizens' overall perceptions of partisan bias.

First, we wanted to grasp what news channels citizens rely on to get informed about current affairs. Therefore, we asked respondents; *'Which of the following traditional news media (newspapers, television and radio) do you most often follow to stay informed of the news (national, regional or local news)?'* A list of eleven outlets and their online equivalent (website) was provided – including all Flemish newspapers (*De Standaard*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *De Morgen*, *de Gazet Van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Metro*), television news broadcasts (*Eén* (public broadcast), *VTM* (commercial broadcast)), weekly news magazine (*Knack*), and the principal radio news broadcast (*Radio 1*)⁶. Citizens who indicated that they did not consume any of these outlets were removed from the analysis⁷, reducing our sample of citizens to 1,105 – the actual N in our models being slightly lower because of missing values on key explanatory variables. Respondents who

⁴ See <https://www.dynata.com/> for more information on their panel.

⁵ The panel approach was purely a practical decision. This study relies on the second wave and respondents were not reminded of the previous wave – and likely did not remember given the five month time span.

⁶ We include all Flemish outlets that primarily cover current affairs. In addition, these outlets also rank highest in terms of on- and offline reader/viewership (Newman et al., 2020).

⁷ In total, 85 respondents indicated that they did not follow the news on any of the outlets we presented. A logistic regression predicting *not consuming news on one of these outlets* shows that dropping these respondents does not affect our sample; neither educational level, age, political orientation nor gender significantly predicts being dropped from our analyses.

indicated what news media outlet they mostly rely on to stay informed, were subsequently asked to what extent its *overall content* favors each of the seven parties present in the Flemish parliament (the Extreme left, Greens, Socialists, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Right-wing Nationalists and Extreme right). Specifically, we asked them; *'News media can (implicitly) disadvantage or favor certain parties in their reporting. Below you find a list of some political parties that are active in Flanders. Can you indicate to what extent you have the impression that these parties are being disadvantaged or favored by [Inset favorite outlet]?',* ranging from (0) strongly disadvantaged to (10) strongly advantaged⁸.

To explain variation in citizens' perceptions of news media bias, some additional variables were measured. A few socio-demographic control variables such as age, gender and level of education were incorporated in the survey. Additionally, to test H1 to H3, we measured citizens' level of political involvement – operationalized as political interest (*How interested are you in politics?*) –, trust in democracy (*Can you indicate on a scale from 0 to 10 how much you personally trust the national & regional parliament, national & regional government, politicians and parties in general*) and their self-placement on a left-right scale (*In politics, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?*). Citizens' left-right placement was later recoded into a 5-point scale measuring 'extremism', where those who position themselves towards the ends of the scale (0 or 10) are considered most ideologically extreme. Finally, to grasp citizens' party preferences, we rely on two different questions. First, we asked for respondents' vote choice (*Imagine that there would be general elections today. Which party would you vote for?*) and their propensity to vote for each of the seven parties (*Can you indicate how likely it is that you would ever vote for each of the following parties that have seats in parliament? Where 0 means highly unlikely and 10 means highly likely?*).

⁸ The scant empirical studies that actually measure the (dis)favorability of an *overall* news outlet use a dichotomous variable (favored or not) instead of using a more fine-grained scale (e.g. Goldman & Mutz 2011).

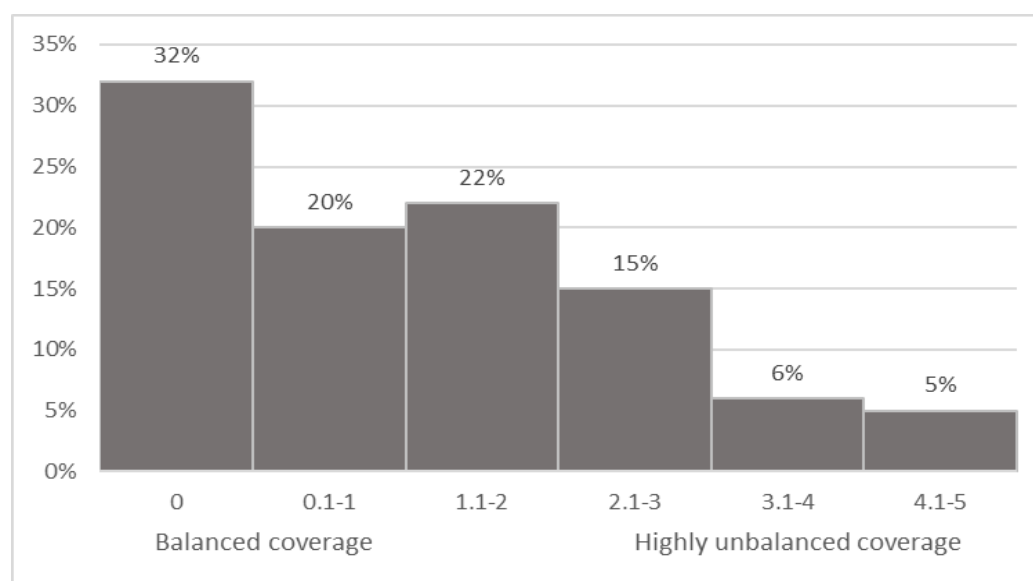
Some methodological choices deserve an explanation. First, the fact that we ask citizens about their perceptions of bias with regard to the news outlet they most often consult likely impacts our findings. Since citizens mainly consume news from outlets they trust, deem credible and seemingly share their vision with – especially since they are asked to pick *one* outlet (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) –, the context of our study serves as a conservative test of the hostile media phenomenon. After all, research has shown that (perceived) source credibility is crucial in downplaying perceptions of bias – see for instance Gunther (1992) for more information on the importance of source credibility, or Reid (2012) on the fact that the label of an outlet is an important heuristic that affects how information is perceived. Second, we do not ask citizens to reflect on just one specific news item or story, but focus on how the *outlet as a whole* is perceived (see Goldman & Mutz, 2011 for a similar approach). Doing so, we tap into the general credibility of the news outlet (covering a wide time-span and a wide set of issues) rather than zooming in on the competence of an individual journalist or on the specifics of one news story (see Lee, 2005 for a similar argumentation). Third, we take full advantage of the multiparty context, and ask citizens how they perceive their favorite news media outlet to cover *seven different parties*. Doing so enables us to examine citizens’ *general* perceptions of partisan bias in their preferred news outlet, and to explore whether they perceive the outlet to be biased against their preferred party (*directional* perception of bias).

Results

Let us first take a look at how biased citizens believe news media outlets are in *general*. To do so, we create a variable that grasps citizens’ average ideas of how biased their preferred outlet is towards each of the seven parties, disregarding the direction of the bias. Thus, regardless of whether they perceive certain parties to be advantaged or disadvantaged, each citizen gets a score that indicates how they, on average, position an outlet on a scale from 0 – no bias against any of the parties – to 5,

meaning that the outlet is perceived as extremely biased⁹. As **Figure 1** shows, 32% of the citizens perceive no partisan bias at all: they believe the news outlet they consult most often has a balanced, fair way of covering all parties. Of course, this implies that a large majority (68%) does believe that some partisan bias is present in the outlet. While most citizens believe there is only a small bias (the average is 1.3), 15% believes there is quite a substantial bias, and 11% even indicates that the outlet is extremely biased, clearly (dis)advantaging some parties over others. While we examine perceptions of partisan bias in a rather non-partisan media context, results are strikingly similar to what has been found in the American context. A study of the Pew Research Center (2002) for example showed that 47% of the interviewed US citizens believed that news organizations are in general biased, while 35% disagreed with this statement. Importantly, we find quite some variation in the extent to which citizens perceive such a partisan bias. In what follows, we explore this variation in more detail.

Figure 1 – Average perception of bias across parties (N= 1,080)



⁹ The original scale is recalculated in such a way that scores of 5 are considered balanced (no bias), whereas scores of 0 or 10 are considered completely unbalanced, as it means that in the perception of the respondent the outlet fully favors or disfavors a party. This score is calculated for each party and we then take the average across the seven parties.

The results of a linear regression analysis examining variation in citizens' *general* perceptions of partisan media bias and empirically testing the expectations outlined in the theory section are presented in **Table 1**. The results reveal some individual characteristics that, at least to a certain extent, shape citizens' perceptions of partisan bias in the media.

Table 1 – Explaining citizens' general perception of partisan bias in the news media

	Coef(Std. Err.)	P> t
Political interest (H1)	.10(.04)	.027
Ideological extremity (H2)	.14(.03)	.000
Trust in democracy (H3)	-.10(.02)	.000
Controls		
Age	.00(00)	.260
Male	.32(.08)	.000
Education (Ref. = Lower educated)		
Educated	.08(.18)	.651
Higher education	-.05(.18)	.774
News media dummies omitted		
Constant	.60(.35)	.091
N	1,080	
Adjusted R ²	10%	

First, and in line with hypothesis 1, we find that politically interested citizens perceive more partisan bias in the news, thereby confirming the idea that involvement in politics heightens perceptions of partisan media bias. This finding is particularly striking because political involvement increases political knowledge (e.g. Mondak & Anderson, 2004); interested citizens are better able to process facts, yet at the same time we find that they unduly perceive more partisan coverage bias in a non-partisan media context. Second, we find that ideological extremity is quite strongly related with perceived media bias: citizens who adhere to an outspoken political ideology are more likely to perceive their preferred news outlet's coverage as partisan biased, confirming our second hypothesis. Finally, we find that trust in democracy is negatively related to perceived media bias: those who have faith in democracy are less skeptical about the objectivity of news media coverage, which confirms our third hypothesis, and the importance of studying perceptions of partisan bias in the first place since it shows to be related to citizens' crucial trust in democratic institutions. Interestingly, we see that men are significantly more likely to perceive partisan bias in news media coverage compared to female citizens – which confirms findings from Eveland Jr and Shah (2003).

However, to put the hostile media phenomenon to an empirical test, we also need to know in which *direction* citizens' perceptions of partisan bias go. To explore whether citizens believe their most consumed news outlet disadvantages their preferred party and advantages their political opponents, and in order to investigate which factors impact this hostile media phenomenon, we stack our dataset so that each citizen is represented seven times; one time for each *party* they rated on the media-bias scale – that runs from 0, strongly disadvantaged, to 10, strongly advantaged. Our first goal is to check whether party preference affects perceptions of bias (H4a). To do so, we include a variable in our model that grasps citizens' party preference – a dummy variable that gets the score of 1 when citizens indicate how strongly their preferred party is (dis)advantaged in the news outlet and 0 when they do so for other parties. At the same time, the concept of hostile media bias also covers the idea that partisans perceive their opponents to be favored in the media. Thus, in order to test

Hypothesis H4a properly, we also create a variable that gets the value of 1 when the respondents indicate their perceptions of bias for a party they dislike – operationalized as each party that scores below 5 on the propensity to vote-scale. Finally, to test hypothesis H4b and H4c, we respectively include interaction effects between citizens' preferred party and the strength of party preference (based on their propensity to vote for this party) and between their preferred party and their left-right self-placement.

Looking at the results in **Table 2** (Model 1), we find confirmation for the hostile media phenomenon: citizens believe that their preferred party is systematically disadvantaged (negative effect), while the parties they dislike are seemingly advantaged (positive effect). In the context of a multiparty system, though, some parties are closely aligned and while voters can only show appreciation for one party on election day, they can in reality appreciate multiple parties at the same time. Therefore, as an additional robustness test, we construct a variable that gets the score of 1 if the propensity to vote for a party is eight or higher on a ten-point scale and run the exact same analysis including this alternative measure of party preference. We find, again, that citizens perceive *all* parties they like to be disadvantaged (coef.=-.20, $p=.003$)¹⁰. Zooming in on Model 2 in the same table, we also find confirmation for Hypothesis H4b: strength of partisanship (that is: a person's propensity to vote for their preferred party) amplifies the hostile media effect; the more strongly citizens support their preferred party, the more they perceive news coverage to be biased against this party. Finally, to examine whether the hostile media phenomenon is more common among left or right-wing citizens, we include an interaction between citizens' ideological self-placement and their preferred party in Model 3, which confirms our final hypothesis: the more rightwing citizens are, the more they believe news coverage in their preferred outlet is biased against their preferred party.

¹⁰ Note that the hostile media effect also holds when we do not use dichotomous measures for the preferred and disliked party but instead use the continuous measure of the propensity to vote for a party. This analysis is depicted in Table A2 (Supplementary Information file) and, following our theoretical expectation, demonstrates that the more likely it is that a respondent will vote for a certain party, the more he/she perceives a disadvantage in the coverage of that party in their preferred outlet.

Table 2 – Testing the hostile media phenomenon

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef(Std. Err.)	P> t	Coef(Std. Err.)	P> t	Coef(Std. Err.)	P> t
Preferred party (H4a)	-.36(.07)	.000	1.2(.33)	.000	-.10(.09)	.259
Disliked party (H4a)	.32(.05)	.000	.28(.05)	.000	.30(.05)	.000
Strenght of party preference			.05(.01)	.000		
Rightwingness					.23(.08)	.00
Preferred party*Strength of party preference (H4b)			-.18(.04)	.000		
Preferred party*rightwingness (H4c)					-.61(.13)	.000
Age	.01(.00)	.000	.01(.00)	.002	.01(.00)	.002
Male	.00(.08)	.982	-.08(.08)	.322	-.04(.08)	.614
Education (Ref. = lower educated)						
Educated	.21(.17)	.204	.18(.16)	.274	.18(.17)	.280
Higher educated	.25(.17)	.138	.18(.17)	.277	.19(.17)	.258
News media dummies & party dummies omitted for brevity						
Constant	5.3(.33)	.000	4.7(.39)	.000	5.4(.23)	.000
N (groups)	7,523(1,080)		7,523(1,080)		7,523(1,080)	
Variance_within	1.1		1.0		1.1	
Variance_across	1.7		1.6		1.6	
R ² (overall)	11%		12%		12%	

Conclusion & Discussion

Over time a large number of studies have demonstrated that citizens perceive news media coverage to be biased against their own views. Since these studies are primarily conducted in a controlled experimental setting, we do not know whether the conclusions also hold in the real world, that is: when we take into account that citizens are selective in what news outlets they turn to and tend to consume news media that confirm their pre-existing ideas. This study aimed to fill this gap by investigating whether citizens perceive partisan bias in their *most favored* news outlet.

Quite surprisingly, we first of all find that two out of three citizens believe there is some partisan bias (that is: bias towards *any party*) in the news outlet they most often consult, with 10% even stating that this outlet is extremely slanted. Considering that we are conducting this study in Belgium - which in comparative perspective actually has a rather non-partisan media system - these findings are remarkable, to say the least. Moreover, we demonstrate that politically involved citizens, those with more extreme ideologies, and those with a lower trust in democracy perceive traditional news outlets to be more biased. Most importantly, though, we show in the second part of the study that even for their most favored news outlet, the hostile media phenomenon can be confirmed. Indeed, citizens even perceive their preferred news outlet to systematically disadvantage their preferred party, while advantaging parties they do not endorse. This is a highly important finding, since we can expect these numbers to be even higher if we had asked them about other news sources they might *not* use. After all, studies have repeatedly shown that citizens tend to consume news from outlets that they perceive as 'like-minded' (e.g. Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In addition, this relative hostile media effect is further amplified when identification with the own party is stronger, and turns out to be stronger among right-wing voters.

There are some questions left unanswered by our study. First, we asked citizens about their perception of bias in one news media outlet only – the one they use the most –, which prevents us from studying source variation and exploring whether citizens systematically perceive some sources, for instance popular newspapers or commercial television news, as more biased than others. Second, our respondents had to pick their most used news source among eleven mainstream news outlets. While these traditional outlets are still clearly dominating the Flemish media environment, alternative news websites, which are often more politically slanted and partisan, are slowly gaining popularity. It is possible that for these outlets we may find different results. We would expect, for instance, that citizens who identify with a party that is of the same political color as one of these alternative, politically slanted, news media outlets, do not perceive them to be biased in favor of their own party (see Goldman & Mutz, 2011 or Arceneaux et al., 2012), even though those news media in reality are. In other words, it is possible that when certain news media are strongly biased, but in favor of the own political side, hostile media perceptions might not exist. Future studies should look into this. Another interesting avenue for future research would be to conduct some additional in-depth interviews with the respondents of our survey. In particular, such a qualitative approach would allow to unravel why some citizens perceive a certain news outlet to be biased. Finally, follow-up studies might consider taking into account citizens' changing news diets, in which social media outlets are becoming all the more important (Newman, 2020).

All in all, our study demonstrates that the widespread belief among citizens that the media is partisan biased, especially against one's own political side, does not only exist in partisan media systems. More importantly, citizens even perceive this bias in the news outlet they use, and therefore favor, the most. This implies that even content produced by 'friendly' sources could contribute to a general distrust towards the media. Although a healthy critical attitude towards news media is not necessarily problematic, blatant skepticism about the objectivity of news coverage may jeopardize the crucial informative role the traditional press is supposed to fulfill in democratic

societies (Christians et al., 2010). A lack of trust in news media decreases citizens' willingness to accept, and to retain the information news media provide. Moreover, citizens' hostile perceptions can be further amplified by political elites who publicly question the objectivity of the media (Watts et al., 1999). Overall, it remains necessary to closely monitor citizens' attitudes towards the news media.

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