The (Partisan) Role of the Press in Direct Democratic Campaigns: Evidence from a Swiss Vote on European Integration

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Reference


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The (Partisan) Role of the Press in Direct Democratic Campaigns: Evidence from a Swiss Vote on European Integration

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Abstract: This article analyzes the role of the press in direct democratic campaigns. The paper argues the press has a dual role: On news pages, newspapers ought to inform citizens about the issue positions and frames of the pro and con camps in a balanced way. In editorials, newspapers act as political advocates that promote their own issue frames and try to shape public opinion through voting recommendations. Comparing the issue positions and frames in editorials and news reports in the run-up to the vote on the popular initiative “Yes to Europe” in Switzerland, this article shows that newspapers give similar visibility to the pro and con camps regardless of the papers’ own editorial position. However, some newspapers favor issue frames that are in line with their editorial perspectives. In conclusion, newspapers are more similar in news report content than in editorial views.

Keywords: Media coverage, Editorial slant, Framing, Direct democracy, Switzerland

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a marked increase in the availability and use of direct democratic procedures. On the one hand, this development is related to the spread of direct democratic institutions in central and eastern European countries after the collapse of communist regimes (Bützer 2001). On the other, direct democracy plays an important role in integrating European nations in the framework of the European Union (EU) (Hobolt 2009; Hug and Sciarini 2000). In Switzerland, the country with the most far-reaching experience with direct democracy, the number of ballot proposals submitted to the vote has increased considerably since the late sixties (Kriesi 2005). As the recent rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon in June 2008 by a majority of Irish voters exemplifies, direct democratic institutions limit control of the decision-making process by the political elites and introduce an element of unpredictability (Ossipow 1994). When a vote takes place, citizen approval cannot be taken for granted, and political elites must try to influence public opinion through information campaigns. To do so, these elites critically depend on the media to communicate their issue positions and frames to the citizen public. Whereas electoral research has come to acknowledge the growing significance of the media in contemporary election campaigns (Dalton et al. 1998; Donsbach 1997), the role of the media in direct democracy is still under-researched, and we know little about how journalists report during a voting campaign (de Vreese and Semetko 2004: 50). This lack of scholarly interest is surprising for at least two reasons: first, citizens in Switzerland and elsewhere rely extensively on the media (especially newspapers) to learn about a ballot proposal (for Switzerland, e.g. Tresch 2008: 119, for European countries: e.g. de Vreese 2006: 587) and, second, the media
have a potentially greater role to play in referendum campaigns than in general election campaigns because referendums are often characterized by close races, higher volatility, a smaller role for party identification and later decision-making than elections (e.g. Le Duc 2002; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002).

In this article, I argue that the media—especially the press—has a dual role in public debates in general and in direct democratic campaigns in particular (for a similar view, see Callaghan and Schnell 2001; de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Page 1996a). Through news coverage, newspapers inform the public about the issue positions and frames of the competing camps and convey information between political actors and citizens. In editorials and commentaries, in contrast, newspapers become political advocates in their own right that raise their voice, set an agenda, pursue policy options and try to shape public opinion (Eilders et al. 2004). In Switzerland, for instance, newspapers use their editorial columns during direct democratic campaigns to openly recommend a “Yes” or “No” vote on a ballot proposal. According to the norms of professional journalism, these two roles should be separated and not interfere with one another. That is, there ought to be a “wall of separation” (Kahn and Kenney 2002) between the editorial pages and the news pages. Yet the wall could be porous, and editorial views might affect news selection and infiltrate news reporting. In covering voting campaigns, newspapers have to select from many available messages offered by competing political actors and might well—consciously or not—prefer the ones that are most in line with the papers’ editorial views. The presence of such an “editorial slant” in news coverage is inherently important as this slant has been shown to affect voters’ electoral choice and electoral outcomes (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Norris et al. 1999), evaluations of political candidates (Kahn and Kenney 2002) as well as electoral participation (van Kempen 2006).

Based on the Swiss case, the aim of this article is to better understand the dual role of the press in direct democratic campaigns, and to assess whether campaign coverage is influenced by a newspaper’s editorial views. To do so, the article relies on a content analysis of the news coverage and editorial pages of the campaign for and against “Yes to Europe!” in spring 2001 in four Swiss quality papers. Although this vote took place a decade ago, it offers a good setting to study the partisan role of the press in direct democratic campaigns. Most importantly, the vote on “Yes to Europe!” was one of the rare instances where major newspapers within each language region issued contrasting voting recommendations in their editorial pages, which offers a unique occasion to test in each main language region whether and to what extent newspapers’ editorial views have crept into information selection in the news pages. In addition, this vote was a decisive moment in Swiss-EU relations as the vote closed the door to EU membership for many years. More generally, the question of Swiss-EU relations is one of the most salient and controversially debated issues in Swiss politics, which leads to deep divisions among the political elite, citizens and the media, and gives rise to particularly intense campaigns (Marquis and Sciarini 1999). Beyond the Swiss case, EU integration has become a key issue for direct democracy given that the future of the EU is contingent upon national referendums (de Vreese and Semetko 2004: 6).

This article proceeds in four sections. The first section elaborates on the dual role of the press and briefly reviews previous research on the influence of editorial views on news reporting. The second section presents some contextual background information, describes the data and introduces log-linear count modeling as a novel method for assessing editorial slant in news coverage. The third section shows the empirical results, and the final section concludes with a discussion and suggestions for future research.
Conceptions of Political Journalism and News Selection

The dual role of newspapers

The dual role of the press as conveyors of information and political advocates has historical roots and goes back to the origins of political journalism. From the beginning of the print era throughout the nineteenth century, partisan journalism was the dominant concept of journalism in the US (Schudson 2008: 21) and Europe (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 26). In this model of journalism, newspapers did not try to be fair or balanced, but saw their central role as influencing public opinion in the name of a political party or cause. Newspapers primarily acted as political advocates; they were supported or even subsidized by political parties and aimed at rallying those who shared their political and ideological positions. In other words, newspapers “paralleled” political parties not only with respect to ideological proximity but also through their organizational ties and the partisanship of the papers’ readership (Seymour-Ure 1974). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, an alternative model of neutral, information-oriented journalism emerged and has come to dominate in present-day Western democracies (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In this model, the key role of newspapers is to disseminate neutral information uncolored by partisanship and to provide a forum for exchanging competing standpoints between various political actors, without favoring one side over the other. Although in many countries newspapers are still associated with general, left-right political tendencies, papers no longer serve the interests of political parties, but those of democracy and the public at large (Schudson 2008).

Despite a commitment to notions of non-partisanship and objectivity, information-oriented journalism does not restrict newspapers’ role to disseminating neutral information. Newspapers can still act as political advocates, but the emergence of information-oriented journalism was connected with the development and acceptance of distinct ethical principles and professional norms, which aim at establishing a clear dissociation between the media’s dual role. First, the norm of separating fact from opinion expects journalists to “indicate to the public the distinction between pure information, reported as a fact, and opinion appropriate to commentary or criticism.”¹ This norm of journalistic conduct requires information in the news pages to be factual, balanced and impartial, and confines media opinion to the editorial pages. There, newspapers are allowed and even expected to articulate their opinions and frame political issues, to pursue policy objectives and evaluate the stream of political events, to criticize or support political actors and to ascribe political responsibilities to them (e.g., Page 1996a: 21). Editorials, in other words, are the “legitimate voice of the media” (Eilders et al. 2004), fulfill interpretative, evaluative and persuasive functions, and reflect a newspaper’s political positions. These positions remain relatively consistent over time and result in the formation of distinctive, recognizable editorial profiles, which embody the political identity of a newspaper (McNair 2003: 69) and are, at least in many continental European countries, measurable on a left-right scale (for Switzerland, see Blum 2005:124).

Second, common standards of newsworthiness on which journalists agree regardless of their political orientations (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 36) are the second important principle of professional journalism that should lead to a dissociation between the advocacy and information functions. “News factors” are considered to be these inter-subjective and culture-free guidelines for selecting news (Galtung and Ruge 1965: 67), which have indeed con-

¹ See directive 2.3 “Distinction between information and opinion” relative to the Declaration of Duties and Rights of a Journalist, adopted by the Swiss Press Council in 1999 [http://www.presserat.ch/16380.htm].
sistent proven to be relevant for news decisions (e.g., Schulz 1976; Rosengren 1974; Staab 1990a). It therefore comes as no surprise that news value research is commonly regarded as “the most prominent approach to news selection” (Eilders 2006: 5). In the original theory (Galtung and Ruge 1965), news decisions are traced back to the specific properties of an event—so-called news factors—that make the event newsworthy and increase its chances of becoming news. The more news factors an event displays, the greater its news value and the higher the likelihood the event will make the news. News factors include, among others, the elite status of an actor, the level of conflict related to the message or the actor, the unexpectedness of an event or the novelty of a story, or the relevance of an issue (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Schulz 1976; Staab 1990a). As a consequence of such commonly shared, “objective” criteria of news selection, news reports should be highly similar across media outlets, regardless of ideological differences in editorials.

**Editorial views as news selection criteria**

Although different norms of professional journalism aim at a dissociation between the dual role of the media as conveyors of neutral information and political advocates by establishing a “wall of separation” between uncolored news reports and openly evaluative editorials, editorial views might still influence news selection and infiltrate news reporting. First, the norm of separating facts from opinion might successfully prevent journalists from explicit advocacy in their news reporting, but does not rule out the possibility of editorial slant in news selection. In fact, given the limited space for political news, every day newspapers have to select from many available messages competing for media attention and might well—consciously or not—prefer messages that match the papers’ own editorial positions. Second, although various studies have shown that news factors serve as journalistic selection criteria and guide the audience reception (Eilders 1997), news value theory has been criticized for its conception of a passive, apolitical media that mechanically responds to presumably objective characteristics and properties of events and actors. On the one hand, critics have objected that a measurable “objective” reality does not exist and that, as a consequence, news values cannot be described as given, intrinsic characteristics of events or actors (e.g., Rosengren 1974; Schulz 1976). On the other hand, critics have argued that news decisions reflect, to an important degree, the media’s own editorial preferences and interests. In this view, journalists do not select events merely because of their “natural relevance” but rather because they serve the journalists’ own purposes (Staab 1990b: 427–30). Only in retrospect do journalists ascribe news factors to the selected event to justify and objectify the journalists’ news decisions. Empirically, researchers have shown journalists indeed attribute a higher news value to events that are compatible with the journalists’ own political orientations (Kepplinger et al. 1991; Patterson and Donsbach 1996).

These objections are in line with media bias theory, where bias means “a systematic tendency to favour (in outcome) one side or position over another” (McQuail 1992: 191). This implies an editorial slant in news selection, but not necessarily a distortion. While truthfully reporting the positions and arguments of political actors, the media tend to give disproportionate attention to those actors, positions and arguments that most closely correspond to the newspapers’ own editorial views. In other words, facts may be formally separated from opinion, but selecting facts is driven (or at least affected) by editorial opinions. Empirically, many content analyses have provided evidence for the impact of editorial views on news reporting, and different concepts have been used to describe this phenomenon. Notions such as “synchronization” (Schönbach 1977; Eilders 1999), “political parallelism” (Berkel}
“constructed deliberation” (Page 1996b), “editorial slant” (Druckman and Parkin 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002), “instrumental actualization” (Kepplinger et al. 1991) and “opportune witnesses” (Hagen 1993) all refer to a close correspondence between editorial views and the range of opinions and arguments expressed by political actors who are covered in news reports.

**News coverage during direct democratic campaigns**

Despite growing scholarly attention to the role of the media in direct democratic campaigns (e.g., de Vreese and Semetko 2004; Tresch 2008; Häggli and Kriesi 2010; Marquis et al. 2011), the integrity of the “wall of separation” between editorials and news reports has never been studied, neither in Switzerland nor elsewhere (Marcinkowski 2006: 402). However, several studies have examined the impact of editorial views on news selection during general election campaigns. This literature suggests that the tension between the media’s dual role as neutral conveyors of information and political advocates becomes stronger during election campaigns than in routine politics. The notions of balance and fairness become crucial during election campaigns. Given that most citizens rely on the media to form their opinion and make their electoral choice, journalists are well aware of their special obligation to impartially report on a campaign and put extra effort in balancing the news, for instance, in the form of stopwatch rules to guarantee equal speaking time to each main contender in the race (Semetko 1996). However, somewhat paradoxically, the risk of editorial slant in news selection becomes arguably stronger during election campaigns because newspapers in many countries use their editorials to openly endorse particular candidates. As shown by several studies from the US and the UK, such candidate endorsements tend to creep into the coverage of election news and influence the visibility and evaluation of the main contestants in the race (e.g., Druckman and Parkin 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Norris et al. 1999). Similar findings exist for Germany, where the absence of explicit candidate endorsement favors the presence of implicit endorsements in the form of editorial slant in the news selection (e.g. Brettschneider and Wagner 2008; Donsbach 1997).

Although election campaigns follow a different logic and dynamic than direct democratic campaigns (which are by definition issue-specific, involve not only political parties but also many interest groups and social movement organizations, etc.), it seems plausible that editorial views also affect the selection of direct democratic campaign news, at least in Switzerland, where newspapers use editorials to actively intervene in direct democratic campaigns with explicit voting recommendations for or against a given ballot proposal. At the same time, and as is the case of election campaigns, news coverage of direct democratic campaigns imply particular challenges and requirements for the media in terms of respecting balance and fairness considerations (Marcinkowski 2006: 413). However, compared to election news coverage, existing conceptions of balanced news reporting are challenged in the context of direct democratic campaigns: Whereas balance in election news implies granting equal media access to the main contenders in the race, balance in a direct democratic campaign becomes a question of hearing from the “Yes” and “No” camps (de Vreese 2006: 583). In terms of issue positions, direct democratic campaigns thus confront voters with binary choices and align political actors in two clearly identifiable issue coalitions for or against a ballot proposal. This binary conflict structure lends itself particularly well to a contra-punctual style of balanced news reporting, in which both sides of a controversy are contrasted. Therefore, I expect editorial views not to affect the range of issue positions
reported in news pages, but to attribute about equal attention to the Yes and No issue coalitions regardless of a newspaper’s voting recommendation (Hypothesis 1).

However, issue coalitions in direct democratic campaigns do not generally result from an explicit compact or coordinated campaign activities, but simply unite actors who happen to share (for whatever reasons) their position on a given ballot proposal—in this sense, the coalitions are “objective” (Ossipow 1994). Given that most issues are multifaceted and can be framed in different ways, such “objective” issue coalitions often divide further into several “discursive coalitions” (e.g., Tresch 2008) or “component coalitions” (Bernhard and Kriesi 2012), such that actors with otherwise very different ideological perspectives end up campaigning for the same voting outcome, albeit with different strategies and issue frames (de Vreese 2006: 582). In the presence of multiple “discursive” or “component” coalitions of different size and importance, the fairness and balance norms are arguably more difficult to define. Therefore, newspapers might rely less on rules of balance, and more on editorial views when selecting particular issue frames and storylines for their news reports. Hence, I expect editorial views to influence the range of issue frames covered in news reports in such a way as to overemphasize a number of key frames that correspond to the newspaper’s own editorial view (Hypothesis 2).²

**Methodological Approach**

**Case selection and contextual background**

To analyze the impact of editorial views on news coverage, I rely on the example of the popular initiative “Yes to Europe!” (YtE).³ Although Switzerland is not a member of the European Union (EU), European policy has been one of the most salient issues in contemporary Swiss politics for most of the last 15 years. Especially between February 2000 and March 2001, Switzerland’s relationship with the EU was on top of the political agenda. In May 2000, the electorate had to vote on seven bilateral agreements (BA) with the EU, and only a few months after the bilateral treaties were accepted, in March 2001, YtE was submitted to the voters. This popular initiative asked for immediate EU membership negotiations and was successfully submitted to the authorities in June 1996. In a message to the parliament in January 1999, the government explained its opposition to YtE. Although committed to the ultimate goal of the initiative (EU membership), the Federal Council argued that the time was not ripe for EU membership. In addition, the Federal Council argued from a legal-procedural perspective that foreign policy decisions should remain the domain of the executive branch and that the government should remain free to choose if

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² Note that both hypotheses are in line with Schönbach’s (1977) pioneer study in Germany, which found little evidence for a systematic overrepresentation of one side of a political controversy over the other, but documented an overemphasis of a limited number of key frames according to a newspaper’s own editorial views. Findings from two recent Swiss studies also point in this direction, although neither study compares editorial views with campaign reporting in the news pages. Whereas the longitudinal study by Marquis et al. (2011) finds that press coverage of all 24 ballot votes on welfare state issues from 1995 to 2004 is quite balanced in terms of pro and con issue statements, the case study of the vote on the asylum law in 2006 by Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) uncovers some evidence of a general partisanship tendency in terms of issue frames.

³ In Switzerland, a popular initiative is a request submitted to the Federal Assembly by at least 100,000 citizens to undertake a complete or partial revision of the Constitution, which has to be submitted to the vote of the people and the cantons. If the Federal Assembly uses its right to formulate a counterproposal, the initiative and the counterproposal are subject to a popular vote at the same time.
and when to open EU membership negotiations. As a compromise solution, the Federal Council formulated an indirect counterproposal to the popular initiative (not subject to a referendum vote), which would commit the government to open EU membership negotiations eventually, but not within a fixed period. In parliament, the counterproposal and the popular initiative YtE were rejected by a majority in fall 2000. The popular vote was held on 4 March 2001 after an intense eight-week campaign, during which polls showed declining popular support for YtE. The popular initiative was finally rejected by 76.3% of the voters and all Swiss cantons.

Data

Two methodological approaches have previously been used to assess how editorial views affect news coverage. The first relies on interviews with journalists in quasi-experimental settings and has the advantage of isolating the causes of news decisions (Keplinger et al. 1991; Patterson and Donsbach, 1996). The second and more widely used approach is based on content analyses of editorials and news reports (Berkel 2006; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Eilders 1999; Hagen 1993; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Schönbach 1977). In this article, I follow the second approach, which cannot make causal explanations but is very powerful in detecting political tendencies in news reports.

More specifically, I content analyze four main Swiss quality papers—Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), Tages-Anzeiger (TA), Le Temps (LT) and Tribune de Genève (TdG)—that I selected to control for two important features of the Swiss media system, namely, language region and editorial profile.4 Within each of the main language regions (German- and French-speaking Switzerland), the selected papers serve the same reader market and directly compete with one another (the NZZ and TA are based in the Zurich region, LT and TdG in the Geneva canton), and both have different general and issue-specific editorial positions (Table 1).5

The data-gathering process followed a two-step procedure. First, I selected the daily editorials, commentaries6 and news articles dealing with the popular initiative YtE and published in the papers’ national section between 9 January 2001 (start of the voting campaign by the pro camp) and 5 March 2001 (day after the popular vote). Second, I coded the selected editorials, commentaries and news reports using “political claims analysis” (PCA) (Koopmans 2002; Koopmans and Statham 1999).7 PCA is particularly suited for the present purpose as it allows political statements by the media (in editorials and commentaries) and political actors (in news reports) to be identified, regardless of the form this expression

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4 I focus on the press rather than on TV or radio news because newspapers are the most important source of information for Swiss voters during referendum campaigns and have, with the genre of editorials, a distinct forum to put forward their own opinions and frames.

5 The issue-specific positions were identified in a short “pre-test” by scanning a few editorials published during the voting campaign.

6 In the selected newspapers, editorials and commentaries do not merely reflect the position of the journalist, but of the newspaper as a whole and their content is discussed in the newsroom. While editorials are published daily in a particular, recognizable format (specific font, signature at the bottom, etc.), commentaries appear irregularly, yet are clearly identifiable as the paper’s opinion on the basis of the headline (“our position,” “commentary,” “analysis,” etc.).

7 Part of the data was coded within the larger project Europub.com (http://europub.wzb.eu/). Tests of intercoder reliability indicated reasonable levels of agreement (reliability correlation of 0.91 for the selection of articles, 0.89 for the identification of claims, and 0.93 for the coding of variables).
Ideal-typical claims can be broken down into seven elements—the location of the claim in time and space (where/when), the claimant (who), the form (how), the addressee (at whom), the substantive position on an issue (what), the actor concerned (for/against whom) and, finally, the justifications and frames (why) (Koopmans 2002: 2). In this study, only issue positions (coded as either negative, ambivalent/neutral, positive or no position) and frames (coded as open variable and summarized in 13 categories) are analyzed. Frames are operationalized as the arguments and justifications given by a political actor to support its position. Frames in this sense refer to the aspect of “problem definition” according to Entman’s (1993) famous conceptualization (for a similar operationalization, see Hänggli and Kriesi 2010).

In total, I coded 36 editorials and 279 claims in news articles. Although the number of cases is fairly equal across three of the four newspapers, LT clearly stands apart: Especially in the news section, YtE got twice as much attention as in the other papers (N = 120). Note that the number of claims is not necessarily identical to the number of issue positions or frames. One reason is that up to three issues and frames could be coded. Another reason is that many claims have a fragmentary structure and miss one or several claim elements. As a result, some claims only express opinions without framing the issue (e.g., “The delegates of the Socialist Party decide to support YtE”) while others frame the issue in several ways (e.g., “The People’s Party recommends a ‘No’ vote because EU membership undermines Switzerland’s neutrality and self-determination and has negative economic consequences”).

**Measurement of editorial slant**

The editorial distinctiveness of the selected newspapers is especially important for grasping the impact of editorial views on news content. Short of any objective standards by which to assess editorial slant in news coverage of a single media outlet, the best strategy is to focus on relative editorial slant (Druckman and Parkin 2005: 1031). Even the journalistic balance norm is not a useful baseline for assessing editorial slant in news coverage (Schaffer 2006). In fact, if the balance of power between two issue coalitions in a direct democratic campaign is heavily unequal (e.g., when all major parties are united against a small opposition party), the practice to present both sides of a political controversy equally in a pro/con format may actually put a magnifying glass on the weaker side and lead to biased coverage, as stated by the “paradox of objectivity” (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). To assess editorial
slant, therefore, I compare the distribution of issue positions and frames in editorials and news reports within a single newspaper and between newspapers with different editorial views. If the distribution of issue positions and frames is similar in newspapers with the same editorial views but different in newspapers with contrasting editorial positions, it is fair to conclude that editorial views affect news decisions. In contrast, if the distribution of issue positions and frames is highly similar across newspapers with different editorial views, then newspapers seem to dissociate their dual role as political advocates and neutral conveyors of information.

But how should one assess similarity between several distributions? Previous research has struggled with finding an appropriate methodological approach. To demonstrate the similarities between content in editorials and news reports, researchers most often rely on graphical representations (Berkel 2006; Hagen 1993; Kepplinger et al. 1991; Schönbach 1977) or frequency rankings (Eilders 1999) that can be compared using Spearman correlations (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). Spearman correlations present a double limitation, however. First, they compare only rank orders, but fail to account for relative frequencies. For instance, the top three frames in editorials and news reports might be the same, but in terms of editorial slant, it also matters if the proportions are similar, too. For instance, if the top three frames account for 50, 15 and 10 percent of all frames in editorials but for 30, 26 and 23 percent of all frames in news reports, there is less evidence of editorial slant than if the relative frequencies are similar in editorials and news reports. Second, Spearman rank correlations inform about the strength of the association between two variables (or distributions) but do not tell us what factors account for that specific pattern. To overcome these limitations, I suggest using log-linear count models as an alternative approach. Generally speaking, log-linear count models predict the cell frequencies of a contingency table assuming a Poisson distribution. In the present case, the aim is to test whether editorial views affect the content of news reports, a situation qualified as editorial slant in news coverage. In other words, the goal is to determine whether the conditional distribution of issue positions and frames in editorials can predict the frequency of issue positions and frames in news reports. The differences between predicted and observed frequencies can then serve as an indicator of the presence or absence of editorial slant in news coverage. If the “discrepancy” or “deviance” between the observed and predicted frequencies is smaller than a critical value (given by the numbers of degrees of freedom and the chosen level of significance), then it is fair to conclude that editorial views affect news decisions and produce editorial slant in news coverage.

Media(ted) Campaign on “Yes to Europe!”

The media as political advocates: Editorial views on “Yes to Europe”

This section analyzes how the four papers used their editorial columns to influence public opinion during the voting campaign on the popular initiative YtE. Table 2 shows the papers’ issue positions on the ballot proposal. Among the four papers, only the editorial staff of TdG was internally divided over YtE. The other papers adopted clear-cut voting recommendations: the NZZ called for a “No” vote, whereas TA and LT advocated a “Yes” vote.

Although all papers seized the opportunity to communicate their position on YtE to their readers, they did so to varying degrees. The two papers in favor of YtE (LT and TA) were more active campaigners and devoted more editorials to YtE. This observation holds espe-
cially true if one also considers the number of times the papers commented on the campaign without explicitly reiterating their own position on the initiative, for instance, by criticizing the strategy of particular actors or by analyzing new survey results (this occurred four times in LT, twice in TA, once in TdG and never in the NZZ). Even without explicit voting recommendations, these editorials signaled the newspapers’ assessment of issue salience to their readers (Eilders et al. 2004), and based on the number of editorials, the salience was apparently higher for the papers supporting the ballot proposal.

However, newspapers not only use editorials to communicate their issue positions or assessment of issue salience. Through framing, newspapers also give meaning to issues and promote a particular interpretation and understanding of what is at stake.

In the run-up to the vote on YtE, all four papers championed a limited number of frames (Table 3). Especially the NZZ had a narrow argumentative line that centered on a simple question: should the government be obliged to open EU membership negotiations right now? For the NZZ, the answer was a clear “No.” First, the NZZ claimed, the recently accepted bilateral agreements with the EU should be given absolute priority and be implemented before any further integration steps. Second, the popular initiative was nothing but a “dupery” (NZZ, 28 February 2001), to be voted on at a very bad moment when the public was not ready and institutional reforms not yet achieved. Finally, the government should keep its full constitutional right to freely decide about the course of Swiss foreign policy. Among the supporters of the initiative, TA also mainly insisted on tactical perspectives and underlined the opportunity of the moment. TA repeatedly reminded readers that the issue at stake was not EU membership as such, but only the question of whether membership negotiations should be launched. From TA’s point of view, everyone, not only EU supporters, should have an interest in such negotiations. For TA, membership negotiations would provide many advantages: initiate a vast debate about Switzerland’s position and future in Europe, oblige the political and economic elite to take position, exert pressure on the government and, most importantly, reveal the “price” of EU membership. LT shared these tactical considerations. For LT, “a ‘Yes’ vote is reasonable because only the mobilization of an important minority can guarantee that this question of national destiny remains on the political agenda” (Le Temps, 28 February 2001). From this perspective, the time for EU membership negotiations had come, and (constitutional) inconveniences of the popular initiative should not serve as an excuse for a “No” vote. The popular initiative, LT argued, should rather be seen as a question of principle for or against EU membership—and only membership would provide Switzerland with

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Abbreviations: NZZ = Neue Zürcher Zeitung, TA = Tages-Anzeiger, LT = Le Temps, TdG = Tribune de Genève.

*Weighted mean. Cramer’s V: 0.704*** (p < 0.001).
codetermination rights and guarantee its sovereignty and independence in the future. Finally, and as a consequence of the ambivalent editorial position on YtE, TdG did not offer a coherent framing of the initiative to readers.

The media as conveyors of information: Political actors’ views on “Yes to Europe”

As seen above, Swiss quality papers use their editorial columns to actively participate in direct democratic voting campaigns and to shape public opinion with voting recommendations and issue framing. According to the norms of professional journalism, these editorial views should not affect coverage of the voting campaign. News coverage should give an accurate, fair and balanced account of the unfolding campaign and should therefore be highly similar across papers with different editorial views. As Table 4 shows, this is partially the case for issue positions.

With the notable exception of LT, opponents of the initiative YtE have a slight advantage over the initiative’s supporters in all papers, with negative views accounting for about 50 to 55 percent of all issue positions on YtE. In line with the first hypothesis, editorial stances seem not to affect the coverage of issue positions during the direct democratic campaign—at least for these three papers. Both political camps got about equal opportunities to present their positions on YtE, regardless of whether the paper recommended a “No” vote (NZZ), a “Yes” vote (TA) or was ambivalent (TdG). This finding suggests that all three papers are committed to the balance norm and the practice of presenting both sides of a political controversy in a pro/con format (for similar results, see Marquis et al. 2011). In the case at hand, this journalistic practice favored the supporters of YtE—a fact known as the “paradox of objectivity” (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992): Whereas positive positions on

Table 3: Editorial issue frames on “Yes to Europe” (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NZZ</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>LT</th>
<th>TdG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codetermination</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic advantages</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally pro-EU</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good moment, time is ripe</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactical “Yes”</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/procedural reasons</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic drawbacks</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally anti-EU</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad moment</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral agreements have priority</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactical “No”</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/procedural reasons</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: NZZ = Neue Zürcher Zeitung, TA = Tages-Anzeiger, LT = Le Temps, TdG = Tribune de Genève.

Cramer’s V: 0.590*** (p < 0.001).
YTtE represented between 43 and 48 percent in news reports, TYtE got only 39 percent of supporting votes in parliament, political parties campaigning for YTtE had an electoral share of roughly 32 percent, and less than a fourth of paid ads published in six major newspapers were in favor of YTtE (Tresch 2008). Thus, and in line with Hänggli’s (2010: 126) results for two direct democratic campaigns on immigration, the media balanced out existing differences between competing issue coalitions by putting a “magnifying glass” (de Vreese 2006: 583) on the smaller and less active coalition. This practice implies that notoriously weak civil society actors have better chances of winning media attention during direct democratic campaigns than in routine politics if they oppose the position of the government and the parliamentary majority (see Höglinger 2008).8

Only in LT, and in line with the paper’s editorial view, the “No” camp was less visible than the supporters of YTtE. Despite this deviation by LT, the four newspapers were overall much more different in the partisan content of their editorials than in their news reports. Despite diverging editorial positions, all papers provided a forum for exchanging competing standpoints on YTtE (for a similar finding in the context of presidential elections in the US, see Dalton et al. 1998).

As Table 5 demonstrates, readers of all papers were also exposed to many different frames on YTtE.

An attentive reader of the news reports published in the four papers could pick up many different interpretations and perspectives on YTtE. However, and as shown for other direct democratic votes (Hänggli 2010), news coverage in each paper centered on four to five salient frames. Despite some overlap, the rank order and size of the top three frames were different across the papers. This result confirms the second expectation that the coverage of issue frames leads to more variation between newspapers than the coverage of issue positions. Given that the binary structure of direct democratic choices divides the political elite into pro and con camps, newspapers can quite easily comply with the balance norm by applying a pro/con format to news reports. Due to the variety of issue frames and the existence of several discursive coalitions, the balance norm seems more difficult to define, and this leads to more heterogeneity in the coverage of issue frames.

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Table 4: Political actors’ issue positions on “Yes to Europe” in news articles (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Ambivalent</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NZZ</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TdG</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean*</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: NZZ = Neue Zürcher Zeitung, TA = Tages-Anzeiger, LT = Le Temps, TdG = Tribune de Genève.

*Weighted mean. Cramer’s V: 0.083 n.s. (p > 0.05).

As rightly stated by Hänggli (2012), better media visibility of outsider actors during a direct democratic campaign does not necessarily imply that they also get their messages across. Indeed, her comparison of actors’ media input and the media’s coverage of this input shows that the minister’s frames are multiplied the most.
Editorial slant in news coverage of “Yes to Europe”

Despite the diversity of reported issue positions and frames in all newspapers, the question remains whether editorial views affect news decisions and infiltrate news reporting. As seen above, this does not seem to happen with regard to issue positions, which are fairly equally distributed across newspapers (except for LT). Given that the frames are distributed far less uniformly, it makes sense to test whether the distribution of issue frames in the news section is related to the distribution issue frames in editorials. This test is performed based on a log-linear count model, more specifically the topological model (Powers and Xie 2000: 111).

Simply put, this model assesses for each newspaper whether the conditional distribution of issue frames in editorials (Table 3) can predict the frequency of issue frames in news articles (Table 5). Table 6 shows the results, which have been adjusted with the GENLOG procedure in SPSS.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro</th>
<th>NZZ</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>LT</th>
<th>TdG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codetermination</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic advantages</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally pro-EU</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good moment, time is ripe</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactival “Yes”</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/procedural reasons</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic drawbacks</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally anti-EU</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad moment</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral agreements have priority</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactival “No”</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/procedural reasons</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total                      | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
N                           | 70  | 70  | 127 | 67  |

Table 5: Political actors’ issue frames on “Yes to Europe!” in news articles (in %)

Abbreviations: NZZ = Neue Zürcher Zeitung, TA = Tages-Anzeiger, LT = Le Temps, TdG = Tribune de Genève. Three most prominent frames in bold type.

Cramer’s V: 0.258** (p < 0.01).

Editorial slant in news coverage of “Yes to Europe”

Despite the diversity of reported issue positions and frames in all newspapers, the question remains whether editorial views affect news decisions and infiltrate news reporting. As seen above, this does not seem to happen with regard to issue positions, which are fairly equally distributed across newspapers (except for LT). Given that the frames are distributed far less uniformly, it makes sense to test whether the distribution of issue frames in the news section is related to the distribution issue frames in editorials. This test is performed based on a log-linear count model, more specifically the topological model (Powers and Xie 2000: 111).

Simply put, this model assesses for each newspaper whether the conditional distribution of issue frames in editorials (Table 3) can predict the frequency of issue frames in news articles (Table 5). Table 6 shows the results, which have been adjusted with the GENLOG procedure in SPSS.9

To start, I estimated the so-called independence model (model 1), which serves as a base model and assumes that there is no association between newspapers and issue frames in news articles (that is, the model assumes independence between the columns and rows in Table 5). As can be seen from the likelihood ratio test, this is not a fitting model (p < 0.05). In other words, there is a statistically significant association between newspapers and issue frames in Table 5. Were this not the case, the analysis would end here; there would be no evidence of editorial slant in news coverage. However, given that the distribution of issue frames in news articles differs significantly across the four papers, I estimated a topological count model (model 2) with four parameters—one for each newspaper—to test whether the issue frames distributed in each newspaper’s editorials can predict the

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9 To avoid structural zeros in the modeled contingency table, empty cells were attributed a value of 0.1.
Table 6: Topological count models for issue frames in news articles on “Yes to Europe”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neues Zürcher Zeitung</td>
<td>2.300*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tages-Anzeiger</td>
<td>0.331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Temps</td>
<td>2.248*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribune de Genève</td>
<td>1.667</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrees of freedom (df)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood ratio (LR)</td>
<td>70.270</td>
<td>57.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < 0.05.

frequency of issue frames in the news section of each paper. Although model 2 is not a fitting model either, it significantly reduces the “deviance” between the observed and predicted frequencies (Δ LR = –12.615, 4 df, p < 0.013). Most importantly, though, two of the estimated parameters are statistically significant and positive. In other words, the distribution of issue frames in the editorial pages of the NZZ and LT are positively related to the distribution of issue frames in their respective news sections. This finding can be taken as evidence of editorial slant in news coverage: As expected, editorial views affect the selection of issue frames to be included in news reports—at least in the case of the NZZ and LT.¹⁰

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to contribute to our understanding of the role of the press in direct democratic campaigns. This role was conceptualized as a dual one—in editorials, Swiss newspapers act as political advocates that try to shape public opinion through voting recommendations and issue frames; in news reports, the newspapers serve as a forum for other actors’ political views and inform citizens about competing issue positions and frames. The comparison of the content of editorials and news reports in the run-up to the vote on the popular initiative “Yes to Europe” in Switzerland analyzed whether the major quality papers confine their own political views to the editorial pages, or whether these editorial views affect news decisions and infiltrate news reporting.

First, with respect to issue positions for and against the ballot proposal, my findings show no evidence of slanted news coverage (see also Marquis et al. 2011). Regardless of the newspapers’ editorial positions, all four applied a rather strict pro and con format to their campaign coverage and gave similar visibility to the competing political camps. These findings suggest that during direct democratic campaigns the balance norm tends to override conventional news values, which work at the advantage of high-ranking state actors and would normally give most media attention to the position of the government and the parliamentary majority. In campaign coverage of YtE, this was not the case: the “No” camp, headed by the government and a vast parliamentary majority, received barely more media

¹⁰ Some readers might object that the frequency of issue frames in Table 5 primarily differs across language regions: Regardless of divergent editorial positions between newspapers from the same language region, generally pro-EU frames are much more frequent in French-speaking newspapers, for instance, whereas generally anti-EU frames are dominant in German-speaking papers. However, controlling for language region does not yield any significant results for this control variable, while all other parameters are robust and hardly change at all (results available upon request).
attention than the supporters of the initiative. Thus, as in election news coverage, the balance norm in direct democratic campaign coverage has the effect of providing more or less equal visibility to the main competitors (be they political candidates running for office or issue coalitions mobilizing for or against a ballot proposal). While it might be desirable to provide individual contenders in election campaigns with equal chances to present their views, evening out existing power structures in direct democratic campaigns might be more problematic. If one of the camps in a direct democratic campaign represents a clear minority position (compared to their electoral share, the number of published ads or public opinion polls), as was the case of the supporters of the popular initiative “Yes to Europe!”, the balance norm introduces a “paradox of objectivity” (Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992) and biases campaign coverage in favor of the weaker side, whose positions enjoy less acceptance in the eyes of the public (for a similar finding, see Hänggli 2010).

Second, regarding the reported issue frames in news articles, my topological count models uncovered a statistically significant relationship with the preferred frames of two of the four newspapers. Thus, some newspapers occasionally use their power to shape campaign discourse by selecting from many available sources the ones that are most in line with the papers’ own interpretation of the issues at stake. This suggests that the journalistic norm of dissociating editorial views and reported facts gets violated at times, although my findings concur with Patterson and Donsbach’s observation that journalists’ partisanship only “shade the news rather than coloring them” (1996: 463). Even though the effects are not very strong and did not show up systematically in all four newspapers, this finding confirms the expectation that the multi-faceted character of most ballot proposals offers the media substantial leeway in putting forward their own preferred frames through the news selection.

This study has two main limitations. First, the causal mechanisms as well as the implications of editorial slant in news coverage were not explored. To tease out causal mechanisms, one should look into the antecedents of editorial slant in Swiss newspapers. On the one hand, researchers could try to determine whether this slant is a product of organizational processes and specific newsroom structures (e.g., Sigelman 1973, Esser 1998) or rather the effect of the personal attitudes and beliefs of individual journalists. On the other hand, scholars should account for political actors’ communication strategies. Hänggli (2012), for instance, showed that the media tend to reflect political actors’ media input when covering a direct democratic campaign rather than actively construct their own frames. If it could be shown that political actors strategically target ideologically close newspapers while making no special efforts to win the attention of media outlets with positions different from their own, then campaign coverage would appear slanted when in reality the media passively transmit the campaign material that they receive from political actors.

Second, it remains unclear whether and to what extent my findings can be generalized beyond the presented case study to other policy fields and to other countries. It could be argued that European integration policy is a special case. Indeed, European integration has been a particularly salient issue in Switzerland for years, and editorial slant could consequently be more pronounced than in other policy fields. However, since the rejection of participation in the European Economic Area in 1992 by a very small majority of Swiss voters, Swiss-EU relations are a particularly sensitive issue, and newspapers might be especially careful not to favor one side over the other. Given that my results tend to concur with recent studies on direct democratic campaign coverage in Switzerland (Hänggli 2010, Marquis et al. 2011), I am confident that direct democratic campaigns on other ballot
proposals would lead to similar findings. However, results are likely to be different for direct democratic campaigns in other countries. Given the century-long experience with direct democracy in Switzerland, Swiss newspapers have developed special journalistic routines as well as a heightened consciousness of their particular responsibility during a voting campaign that allows the papers to report in a fair and balanced way while simultaneously trying to shape public opinion through editorials. These factors might be lacking in other countries, where citizens only occasionally vote on direct democratic proposals, mostly in the context of EU treaty reforms, and where the media most likely rely on the same news values that dominate news coverage in routine politics (see Marcinkowski 2006). Thus, there is a clear need for more systematic research, cross-nationally and within national contexts. Comparisons should include different countries, several policy issues, other types of newspapers and a longer period to further our understanding of newspapers’ role in direct democratic campaigns.

References


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