Were Online Media Biased? An Assessment of Statement and Actor Bias During the 2015 Referendum in Greece

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Referendum campaigns are highly mediated events likely to influence voters' propensity to opt for "yes" or "no." Media bias commonly refers to coverage that deviates from the norms of balance, fairness, and impartiality. Despite its widespread use, the notion of bias is quite complex, carrying multiple meanings and measurements. We define overall bias as the advocacy of "yes" and "no" vote choices expressed through statement and actor bias. Drawing on a quantitative analysis of the 2015 bailout referendum in Greece, we show that although overall online coverage was not biased, media type had a significant effect on the presence of bias. Legacy media favored the "yes" vote choice, alternative media skewed toward the "no" vote choice, and web natives and the public broadcaster maintained a balanced approach. Probing further, we found that alternative media produced biased content mainly through statement bias, while legacy media's pro-yes tilt was predominantly performed through actor bias.

Keywords: media bias, referendum campaign, statement bias, actor bias, objectivity, sources, Greek bailout referendum

Referendums are an important means of enacting or preventing legislation; their use is consistently advocated against citizen disengagement and cynicism toward political processes. The outcome of a referendum depends largely on the campaign often being "decisive for defining the issue and crystallizing public opinion" (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004a, p. x). The quality of media debate during a referendum campaign is critical for providing citizens with sufficient and balanced information to make enlightened voting choices (Renwick & Lamb, 2013). Although research on news bias is ample, it remains a complex concept about its meaning, measurement, and impact (Lichter, 2017), while its real-life manifestation is understated in relevant scholarship (Zelizer, Park, & Gudelunas, 2002). Bias is commonly understood through its opposite(s), namely impartiality, balance, or fairness. The norm of impartiality is closely connected to the norm of objectivity, which is a core value of Western journalism (Schudson, 2001). Although massively invoked by professionals to certify the "truthiness" of journalistic information (McNair, 2017), the objectivity

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norm has been heavily criticized as unattainable, or as a strategic ritual that produces bias itself (Tuchman, 1972). In general terms, an unbiased news report is a neutral or balanced report that is not strongly slanted in favor of or against any political side (Eberl, Boomgaarden, & Wagner, 2017).

Prior research on media bias has predominantly focused on traditional media; however, the rise of diverse types of digital media has resulted in a complicated media ecology encompassing "newer" and "older" media logics (Chadwick, 2013). These emergent media types contest the power of legacy outlets (Vargo & Guo, 2017), while alternative media are increasingly occupying the media landscape (Baluff, Lind, Boomgaarden, & Waldherr, 2023). This article explores online coverage of the Greek 2015 bailout referendum. Media coverage provoked a public outcry for biased reporting on traditional media (especially TV; Nikolaidis, 2015). Thus, evidence to support or disprove such claims is important for assessing the role of the media during a decisive referendum for the country. Looking for bias in different types of online media and drawing on the concepts of partisan bias operationalized as statement bias (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000) and actor bias (Eberl, Boomgaarden, & Wagner, 2017), we argue that overall online coverage did not exhibit significant levels of bias. When controlling for the media type, however, we found that legacy media favored the "yes" vote choice as opposed to alternative media, where coverage slanted toward the "no" vote choice, while web natives kept the most balanced approach.

What is Bias? Definitions and Typologies

Despite the prevalent position of media bias in public discourse and as a concept to analyze media power, its theoretical and empirical treatment is not clear-cut in the literature (Cline, 2009; Lichter, 2017; Marquis, Schaub, & Gerber, 2011). Indeed, multiple and sometimes overlapping definitions and typologies render their study challenging. Most attempts to define bias in a news report mention favoritism, one-sidedness, or unfairness when presenting events and political debates (Boudana, 2016; McQuail, 2010). Entman (2007) provides a comprehensive account of media bias, which considers three types: *distortion bias*, referring to news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality; however, he argues that this type of bias is hard to assess given the "irresolvable questions about truth and reality" (p. 166); *content bias*, namely news that favors one side in a political conflict; and *decision-making bias*, which considers the motivations and mindsets of journalists who produce the biased content (p. 163). Critical theorists also speak of media bias (often in terms of media hegemony) and attempt to explain it by emphasizing ownership and commercial interests that shape professional news production toward skewed patterns of news reporting (McChesney, 2008).

For election coverage, Stevenson and Greene (1980) defined bias as "the systematic differential treatment of one candidate, one party, one side of an issue over an extended period of time" (p. 116). Other studies (Lindalh, 1983; Sheafer, 2005) posit similar views, emphasizing balanced coverage as the extent of coverage dedicated to vote choices and the stance of news coverage toward them. Pilon (2009) assessed media performance by drawing on concepts from the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" (p. 6), namely inclusion and balance, as well as validity claims. Drawing on the complicated notion of truth, Porpora and Sekalala (2019) argue that fairness remains a core starting point but also emphasize deliberation rooted in contextualization and the provision of arguments and counterarguments as important mechanisms to make it more efficacious. Moving a step further, Marquis et al. (2011) mention seven criteria to appraise the

fairness of media campaign coverage: intensity (sufficient information); duration (sufficient time for deliberation); unbiased coverage (balance or issue neutrality); autonomy (independence from official sources); source inclusiveness (diversity of viewpoints, arguments, and actors); substantive coverage (issue framing vs. horserace framing); and spatial homogeneity (between region variations; pp. 131–134). Regardless of the prism used to examine it, bias is considered harmful to democracy as it deprives audiences of the opportunity to make rational and informed decisions (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015).

Partisan and Structural Bias

Two types of bias loom large in the literature: partisan bias and structural bias (Schiffer, 2006). Partisan bias (or ideological bias) is understood as the conscious or unconscious tilt of coverage because of journalists' personal attitudes and political opinions (Lichter, 2017; Schiffer, 2006) associated with partisanship, advocacy, and ideological standpoints (McQuail, 2010). This occurs when news outlets systematically give more favorable attention to one political party or block another (van Dalen, 2012). Similarly, Entman (2010) defines content bias as "consistently slanted framing [. . .] that promotes the success of a specific interest, party, or ideology" (p. 393). Partisan bias is discussed in terms of liberal or conservative bias and has produced heated debates, especially in the United States (Niven, 2002). A large part of the literature argues that, regardless of its left- or right-leaning tilt, partisan media bias has generally not been substantiated by empirical findings (see D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Gulati, Just, & Crigler, 2004; Lichter, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2007). Others, however, have argued for the ideological ordering of media outlets (Budak, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Niven, 1999). Yet, partisan bias tends to not be explicit; often, news organizations indulge in biased reporting through issue diversion and by disproportionately criticizing one side (Budak et al., 2016; Lee, Hur, Yeon, & Shim, 2022; Tandoc, Takahashi, & Thomas, 2018).

Structural bias approaches news as a form of discourse and focuses on its inherent qualities. If partisan bias reflects ideological judgments, "structural bias reflects the circumstances of news production" (Graber & Dunaway, 2018, p. 411). According to McQuail (2010), structural bias constitutes an unintended deviation from a balanced representation set off by journalistic routines, norms, and news values deeply embedded in the operation of journalism (e.g., economic environment, organizational processes, regulation, relations with the government, newsroom cultures). Cline (2009) lists 10 types of structural media biases: *commercial*, *temporal, visual*, *bad news, narrative, status quo, fairness, expediency, glory,* and *class* bias (pp. 483–484). If we examine these types, we can discern patterns that connect them as well as causal relations. For instance, *commercial bias* is often the root cause of other structural biases, such as *negativity bias* (Hermans & Drok, 2018) or *narrative bias* which emphasizes controversy and drama (Bennett, 2016). Page and Shapiro (1992) referred to other biases stemming from the commercial nature of the media: *pro-capitalist*, *anticommunist*, *minimal government,* and *nationalistic* bias. The *status quo bias* is also fundamental, referring to media representations that "the system works" and explaining the media's reluctance "to question the structure of the political system" (Cline, 2009, p. 484).

Following a meta-analysis of quantitative studies on media bias, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) suggest three types of media bias: *gatekeeping bias,* which refers to the specific selection of stories; *coverage bias,* which measures the physical amount of coverage each side of an issue receives; and *statement bias,* which refers to when journalists interject an opinion into a text (pp. 136–137). Statement bias, theorized as

structural bias, can be empirically assessed in terms of favorable/unfavorable coverage, or positive/negative or neutral/balanced, in case it contains equally biased statements or no biased statements at all. Studies exploring election news coverage in different European countries found that beyond the media system (Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008), media type is an antecedent of structural bias in political news coverage (Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010). Analyzing the two types, Strömbäck and Shehata (2007) noted a difference in intentions between partisan and structural bias.

Although the current work does not discuss media bias effects, it briefly outlines the differential impact on audiences, emphasizing the features of media texts rather than those of voters. Generally, media effects on voter perceptions are supported (e.g., DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Lott & Hassett, 2014). Having studied U.S. newspaper endorsements of candidates, Chiang and Knight (2011) confirmed their influence on voters but found that they were more influential when deriving from neutral media or media with an ideological tilt from the opposite "camp." Eberl, Boomgaarden, and Wagner (2017) concluded that tonality, statement bias, and agenda bias influenced voters, but visibility or coverage bias had no clear impact in the Austrian context. Focusing on voter perceptions of candidates' traits, Eberl, Wagner, and Boomgaarden (2017) found the same effects about tonality/statement and agenda bias; visibility bias had no direct impact, but it moderated the effects of tonality/statement bias. These findings are partly contradicted by an earlier study in the Danish context: Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, and Albæk (2010) found that while the cumulative information environment (television coverage) influenced party choice with direct individual exposure, visibility was influential but not the tone of coverage.

Covering Referendums: Issues and Problems

The media have always occupied a central position in strategic political communication as the main source of information for the public (Hopmann et al., 2010) and as the terrain where the struggle over the meaning of the referendum takes place (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). The increasing sophistication of campaign techniques (DeKavalla, 2016) can influence the outcome by fostering changes in public opinion, political participation, and voters' choice to say "yes" or "no" (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004a). In referendums held under conditions of information complexity and conflicting opinions among elites, the struggle over meaning-making in the media becomes particularly important (de Vreese, 2007). Evidence shows that exposure to media stories advocating a vote choice or emphasizing a particular frame of an issue has a strong impact on audiences' perceptions about issues and vote choices (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004a; Wettstein, 2011).

Scholars have documented problematic aspects of newsmaking during political campaigns. D'Alessio and Allen (2000) concluded that there is a limited but consistent pro-Democratic statement bias in television news. Exploring the deliberative quality of the media with the Ontario referendum debate, Pilon (2009) found that print media failed to provide balanced coverage of competing views. Using seven criteria to judge how news coverage compares to idealized notions of the media's role in the democratic process, Marquis et al. (2011) claimed overall fair coverage by the Swiss press; however, they noted evidence of reasonable bias, as media coverage appeared to largely reflect the issue agenda of the major political forces involved in the campaigns. Analyzing print media coverage during the United Kingdom's 2011 electoral reform referendum, Renwick and Lamb (2013) found that newspaper coverage was biased, as most newspapers showed a strong leaning in one direction or another. With the Brexit referendum, Levy, Aslan,

and Bironzo (2016) advocated heavily skewed reporting in favor of Brexit: 41% of the articles were pro-Leave against 27% that were pro-Remain.

The 2015 Bailout Referendum: Context and Greek Media Traits

After protracted and heated negotiations with the Troika failed, the Greek coalition government led by SYRIZA announced the July 5th referendum. During its time in office, it attempted to reach an agreement based on less austerity. However, the standoff between the Greek authorities and the country's lenders led to a controversial decision to hold a referendum to accept or reject the latest proposal by the EU/IMF. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras announced the referendum on June 27 without prior notice to the Eurogroup.

The referendum, framed as a "yes" or "no" question, asked the Greek people whether they approved or rejected the latest take-it-or-leave-it proposal for another financial rescue package. The referendum triggered a polarizing debate about why it was called and its potential consequences. Following a typology of European referendums (Mendez, Mendez, & Triga, 2014), the Greek bailout referendum fits the logic of "partisan calculus" better. The ultra-short campaign (nine days) took place with banks closed, capital controls imposed, and the entire EU against the government (The Guardian, 2015). Foreign intervention in the referendum campaign was unusually high, and the likely consequences of a noncooperative referendum outcome were a hotly debated issue during the campaign (Walter et al., 2018). The parties of the coalition government, SYRIZA (left-wing) and ANEL (right-wing), along with Golden Dawn (the extreme right-wing party), urged their supporters to vote "no." They argued that a rejection of the agreement would enhance Greece's bargaining power and emphasized that Eurozone membership was not at risk, as Europeans would not jeopardize the monetary union.

The opposition parties of *New Democracy* (right-wing), *PASOK* (Panhellenic Socialist Party), *To Potami*, a newly formed center-left party, and *KIDISO*, led by ex-prime minister George Papandreou, sided with the "yes" camp, which warned that a vote against the bailout proposal would inevitably result in Greece's exit from the Eurozone (Walter et al., 2018). The Communist Party rejected the referendum altogether. Amidst an environment of impending state default, the electorate resoundingly rejected the proposed agreement. With an estimated turnout of 62.5%, 61.3% voted "no," while 38.7% voted "yes." Despite the result of the referendum, the SYRIZA government succumbed to pressure and made a U-turn; one month later, it signed a third bailout deal (Tsatsanis & Teperoglou, 2016).

The campaign provoked numerous complaints, as major private TV channels ran continuous broadcasts and hosted experts advising viewers to vote "yes" (Patrikarakos, 2015). It has been argued that during the crisis, legacy media promoted a pro-austerity agenda by supporting bailout agreements and overly criticizing or silencing dissenting voices (Doudaki, Boubouka, Spyridou, & Tzalavras, 2016). Major private outlets (TV stations and newspapers) hold ties with political and economic elites and tend to report partisan bias (Freedom of the Press, Greece, 2015). The public broadcaster (ERT) stands out as a strong case of "a 'state' rather than 'public' broadcaster" (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019, p. 129). Weak organizational culture and low accountability levels (Doudaki & Spyridou, 2015) have been long-standing traits of professional journalism in Greece. Mainstream media has been in serious trouble since 2010, as the crisis resulted in a dramatic loss of advertising revenue and other subsidies (Siapera, Papadopoulou, &

Archontakis, 2015). Layoffs have boomed, while flexible labor and insecurity are on the rise (Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris, & Dimoulas, 2013). Trust levels for traditional media have dropped significantly (Eurobarometer, 2016), while online ventures attempting to provide counterinformation have proliferated (Siapera et al., 2015). Not surprisingly, Greek users tend to prefer or even trust pure digital outlets rather than traditional mainstream media (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022).

Data and Methods

In today's high-choice media environment, legacy media no longer enjoy the monopoly of publicity (Faris et al., 2017), as citizens receive political information from a diverse set of sources. Chadwick (2013) speaks of a hybrid media system in which legacy and new digital media compete and cooperate, allowing new hubs to emerge and yield considerable influence. In Greece, 55% of users get news from social networks, while 44% choose to visit a website or the application of a news outlet (Reuters Institute, 2016). Thus, to monitor media coverage, it is important to pay attention to online news rather than merely look at traditional legacy media.

Data comprise online news articles referring to the referendum and published in 11 outlets during the nine-day campaign (June 27–July 5, 2015). To have a comprehensive account of the online news landscape, we used the criteria of platform, temporality, topic, scope, ownership, and approach (Salaverría, 2017). About temporality, all websites were continuously updated, were general news outlets (topics), and their scope was national. Additionally, except for public broadcasters, the outlets were chosen based on popularity in their category. Our sample represents four distinct media types: The first type represents the legacy media, referring to media organizations that are created offline, are privately owned and profit-oriented, and are affiliated with political and economic interests (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019). The four legacy media selected are *To Vima* and *Kathimerini*, which are long-established, elite-oriented print, and online newspapers, and *Proto Thema* and *Eleftheros Typos,* which represent the mainstream tabloid press. The second type includes the public broadcaster, which is represented by *ert.gr.* The public broadcaster has traditionally been in close agreement with the government's stance. Even the "new ERT," relaunched in 2015 by the left-wing Syriza government after a two-year closure, has been criticized for government interference (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019).

The third type refers to web natives that have no offline counterparts. Native online media are believed to publish more cutting-edge content (García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018). In their effort to distinguish themselves from legacy media, and despite being more traffic-oriented, web natives try to "include various editorial layers" (Miel & Faris, 2008, p. 27). This category includes *Huffington Post Greece,* the local edition of the international news organization; *in.gr*, a well-established mainstream news portal; and *Newsit*, a tabloid news website. Lastly, the fourth type represents media outlets that fall into the category of alternative media. Although "alternativeness" is hard to define, for our present study, alternative was defined in terms of the media's approach (offering critical, counterhegemonic content), ownership (independent of major news corporations), and funding (self-managed and collectively organized by journalists) (see Harlow & Salaverría, 2016 for the relevant typology of alternativeness). This category includes three outlets: *TVXS*, *The Press Project,* and *EFSYN*.

Data collection proved to be a laborious process that involved repeated visits to media websites several times a day. The total data set amounted to 6,588 articles (Appendix, Tables 1 and 2). A subset of 80 news articles per outlet, equally distributed over the nine days of the campaign, was selected using random stratified sampling. The exception was *The Press Project*, which published 59 articles in the selected period. The final sample was composed of 912 articles (14% of the population) distributed equally across each day (Appendix, Table 3). Following numerous training sessions, the sample was coded by eight coders working in pairs according to a detailed coding scheme. Each pair coded a part of the sample independently. The overall intercoder reliability score was satisfactory (Krippendorff Alpha = 0.8397). Their disagreements were then resolved by a third coder.

The study explores partisan bias, operationalized as statement bias. Statement bias refers to the favorability or nonfavorability of media coverage on a specific issue (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 137). Overall bias in the present study is understood as the advocacy of either the "yes" or the "no" vote choices in the referendum. More precisely, partisan bias is investigated at the level of journalists/editors thrust toward vote choices, as manifested in the news articles and also at the level of actors' statements about the referendum vote choices. Therefore, partisan bias is broken down into two subtypes: (a) statement bias and (b) actor bias. *Statement bias* is understood in terms of directed advocacy in the overall message of an article toward the "yes" or "no" vote. It is measured both at the level of individual articles and at the aggregate level. To measure statement bias, news articles were coded according to whether they supported a vote choice *openly* (when the editor's opinion is discernible by open advocacy, presenting a vote choice in an overly positive manner, or by disparaging a vote choice, etc.); *indirectly or covertly* (e.g., more space devoted to one camp, more prominence in the title, lead or/and photo accompanying the article, or negative evaluations of actors supporting a vote choice); *balanced* (e.g., even-handed presentation of the two camps' positions or neutral coverage of actors); or as pure *factual reporting* (for a similar operationalization of balance, see Marquis et al., 2011, p. 132). Subsequently, these articles were attributed with a value depending on a manifested tendency to support the "no" vote or the "yes" vote, while a news article that did not take any position or employed balanced coverage was coded as *taking no position*.

At the aggregate level, and considering the four media types and their traits, we tested the null hypothesis:

H1:   At the aggregate level, there will be no substantial[1] statement bias.

The second subtype of partisan bias, *actor bias*, is understood as the "voices" (sources) used to report on the referendum's vote choices (i.e., whose issue statements about vote choices are used by the media; Cline, 2009; Eberl, Boomgaarden, & Wagner, 2017). Source selection is a key component of the final news product (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). Who gets to speak in the media and who is excluded determines not merely the information offered but also meaning-making. Sources have an agenda-setting function and can introduce their own frames into media coverage (Lecheler & Kruikemeier,

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[1] Some bias is inevitable, provided that it is not systematic across media outlets and issues (Marquis et al., 2011). Similarly, Bailard (2016) notes that "there is no objective and absolute standard of what unbiased coverage would look like with which to compare the news coverage" (p. 585).

2016). Evidence suggests that quotations affect readers' judgment on news balance: "These quotations work more directly than other structural elements of a news report in creating perceptions of bias in readers who disagree with them" (D'Alessio, 2003, p. 291).

To operationalize *actor bias*, we identified the actors used in the articles and their positions about vote choices (expressed as issue statements and quoted directly or indirectly). The unit of analysis in this case is actor presence and his/her position toward the referendum in each individual article, as well as at the aggregate level. The editor or journalist was not registered as a source/actor. The coding scheme consisted of four categories: (a) dominance of actors who backed the "yes" vote, (b) dominance of actors who backed the "no" vote, (c) balanced presence of actors' advocating for the vote's choices (no position), and (d) no use of actors (no actors). Hence, the null hypothesis about the actors was formed as follows:

H2:   At the aggregate level, there will be no substantial actor bias.

Testing the hypotheses about both statement and actor bias permits a more comprehensive account of how the Greek online media covered referendum vote choices, as both subtypes of bias unfold different sides of coverage. Statement bias assesses the overall message of an article, while actor bias allows us to register all voices in favor of or against the vote choices. Thus, while statement bias measures the overall deviation of a news report from a balanced or neutral benchmark, actor bias allows us to delve further into the narrative techniques employed by journalists.

Control Variables

In our analysis, we tested for the effect of media type on both statement and actor bias and thus formulated the following hypotheses:

H3:   At the level of individual articles, legacy media will be biased in favor of "yes" vote choice, while alternative media and the public broadcaster will be biased in favor of the "no" vote choice.

H4:   At the level of individual articles, actors supporting the "yes" vote choice will be used as sources more frequently in legacy media than in alternative media and the public broadcaster, while in alternative media and the public broadcaster, actors supporting the "no" vote choice will be used as sources more frequently.

Given that web natives are rather recent in the Greek media landscape, and because of the lack of previous studies as well as the variation of media outlets included in this category, instead of formulating a hypothesis, we attempt to explore the position that prevailed (if any) and the use of actors advocating for a vote choice.

The second control variable refers to the time of the campaign. Previous research illustrated that closer to the end of the campaign, media information matters most in affecting how citizens will vote (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b). That said, and given the short and polarized campaign of the Greek referendum,

it is relevant to expect the presence of either statement or actor bias toward the climax of the campaign. In line with this argument, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H5:   *At the level of individual articles, statement and/or actor bias are expected to be more frequent during the last days of the referendum campaign.*

Results

Statement Bias

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) show that, at the aggregate level, the majority of articles take no position. Only one-quarter of the sample took a position toward the "yes" or "no" vote choice. This result confirms the first hypothesis (H1) that no substantial bias exists in the overall online coverage of the referendum. A second step in this exploratory part of the analysis was to run some cross-tabulations to see how these numbers were broken down at the level of media type. In observing the results in Table 1, the most telling aspect appears in the first column. Across all media types, the overwhelming majority of articles expressed no position. This is starkly so in the public broadcasting category, where 96.4% of the articles did not support any vote choice. Indeed, the public broadcaster seems neutral in terms of statement bias.

Table 1. Statement Bias (%) by Media Type in Parenthesis the Actual Number (n) of Articles.

Media type	Statement bias		
	No position	**No vote**	**Yes vote**
Alternative	66.1 (152)	31.3 (72)	2.6 (6)
Legacy	70.1 (230)	1.5 (5)	28.4 (93)
Public broadcaster	96.4 (81)	3.6 (3)	0.0 (0)
Web native	80.3 (208)	2.7 (7)	17.0 (44)
Total	78.2	9.8	12.0

In the remaining articles in which statement bias is detected, a clear pattern emerged: Identified bias exclusively took either a "yes" or "no" position, indicating a lack of internal media pluralism. For further probing, we removed the public broadcaster category, given the extremely less articles that contained a "no" statement bias and the absence of a "yes" bias.[2] Table 2 presents the chi-square test residuals. Not surprisingly, given the cross-tabulations presented above, there was a significant association χ^2 (4, N = 817) = 192.8, $p < 0.0001$) between the media categories. More specifically, the standardized residuals directed us to the most significant interactions among the categories. As a general rule, residuals above 2 or below −2 pointed to significant deviations in the expected count. Table 2 clearly shows that the "yes"/"no" bias positions are driving this result (no significant deviations for the "no position" count). Indeed, there were some particularly large residuals for the alternative media and legacy media categories.

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[2] It can be problematic for a chi square test (as well as for regression analyses) to have such a category, i.e., one with zero observations in a cell and virtually none in the other.

Table 2. Standardized Residuals for Statement Bias per Media Type (Except for the Public Broadcaster). The Second Set of Columns Presents Only the Articles That Contain a No/Yes Vote Position.

Media type	Statement bias				
	No position	**No vote**	**Yes vote**	**No vote**	**Yes vote**
Alternative	−1.09	9.94	−5.40	8.03	−6.15
	(n = 152)	(n = 72)	(n = 6)	(n = 72)	(n = 6)
Legacy	−0.45	−4.95	4.70	−5.19	3.98
	(n = 230)	(n = 5)	(n = 93)	(n = 5)	(n = 93)
Web native	1.53	−3.80	−0.20	−2.73	2.10
	(n = 208)	(n = 7)	(n = 44)	(n = 7)	(n = 44)

Note. χ^2 (4, N = 817) = 192.8, *p* < 0.0001. χ^2 (2, N = 227) = 156.9, *p* < 0.001.

The same test was run on a smaller subset of articles from each media type, where a biased statement position either toward the "yes" or the "no" choice was contained. The cross-tabulation for this subset of articles (N = 227) is also provided in Table 2, in the second set of columns. The chi-square test reveals a high association χ^2 (2, N = 227) = 156.9, p < 0.001). Again, the residuals show where the difference is largest among the media categories, in this case, the alternative media category and, to a lesser extent, the legacy media.

Although the chi-square tests provided a view of the degree of statement bias contained in the individual articles across media types, we also ran logistic regression models to test the variable relationships while controlling for other factors. One putative variable that could have an impact is the time dimension: Three media types (legacy, alternative, and web natives) would be more likely to exhibit increased statement bias during the climax of the campaign when polarization was more prevalent (H5). To test the latter, as well as H3, a multinomial regression was run. The dependent variable, namely statement bias, has three categories: "no position," "yes" bias, and "no" bias. In this case, it makes sense to use the "no position" as the reference category. Similarly, in terms of the key explanatory variable (media type), using web natives as the reference category was appropriate, since it was the least biased among the three media types. Table 3 presents the multinomial regression results, which reveal what was already evident in the cross-tabulations. Using web natives as the reference category, the largest difference was found in alternative media (i.e., it had the largest logit coefficients). Expressed in terms of the more intuitive odds ratio, we find that alternative media is approximately 14 times more likely to exhibit a "no" vote bias than web natives and 5.4 times less likely to exhibit a "yes" vote bias. The difference between web natives and legacy media is less pronounced. Nonetheless, legacy media is about twice as likely to produce a "yes" statement bias compared with web natives.

Table 3. Multinomial Regression on Statement Bias.

Type of media	Statement bias	
	No vote	**Yes vote**
Alternative media	2.634***	−1.689***
	(0.410)	(0.449)
Legacy media	−0.425	0.660***
	(0.594)	(0.207)
Time of the campaign	0.255	0.258**
	(0.162)	(0.119)
Constant	−3.913***	−2.081***
	(0.515)	(0.301)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,083.3	1,083.3

Note. *$p < .5$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .005$.
Reference category for the control variable of web media: Web natives.
Reference category for the dependent variable: No position.

Controlling for the time dimension, we found that there was a temporal impact, albeit a rather weak one. Bias toward the "yes" vote was more likely to appear in media coverage toward the end of the campaign. In sum, legacy media were likely to back the "yes" vote in contrast to alternative media, which were more likely to exhibit a bias toward the "no" vote. This outcome lends partial support to hypothesis H3, since the public broadcaster was found to be essentially neutral, in contrast to what H3 assumed. Finally, concerning web natives, the analysis shows that these media were less likely to adopt a favorable position toward either vote choice.

Actor Bias

The second step in the analysis concerns *actor bias*, namely the use of actors and their position toward the referendum vote. Descriptive statistics (Table 4) show that approximately half of the sample quotes (directly or indirectly) actors, whereas the other half (49.06%) do not. The latter is shown in the first two columns of Table 4. More specifically, the first column ("no position") presents the number of articles that used actors in a balanced manner (no specific position dominated). The subtraction of the two camps is 0, which is noted as having no dominant position. The second column ("no actors") shows the number of articles that did not use any sources/actors at all. Based on this result, the respective hypothesis (H2) is confirmed; the sample is not skewed about the use of actors and their expressed positions. Additionally, Table 4 shows the distribution of articles across media types. The marginal proportions are displayed column-wise for the media types. Clearly, in all four media types, the "no actors" category accounts for the majority of articles, yet with alternative media, this finding is marginal. The basic finding that emerges from Table 4 is that a high proportion of the sample (ranging from 45.2% for alternative media to 57.5% for web natives) does not exhibit actor bias; the use of actors is either balanced or they do not quote actors.

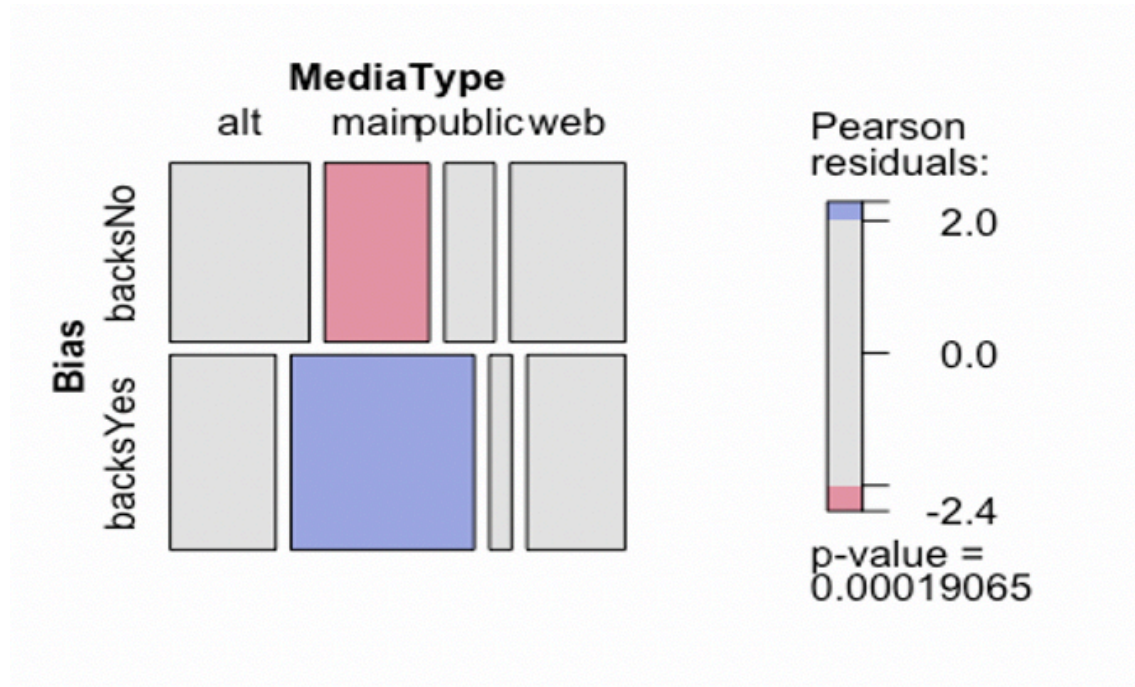**Table 4. Actor Bias (%) by Media Type in Parenthesis the Actual Number (n) of Articles in Each Category.**

	Actor bias			
Media type	No position	No actors	No vote	Yes vote
Alternative	6.52 (15)	38.70 (89)	30.00 (69)	24.78 (57)
Legacy	3.35 (11)	50.61 (166)	15.85 (52)	30.18 (99)
Public broadcaster	0.00 (0)	55.95 (47)	29.76 (25)	14.29 (12)
Web native	3.47 (9)	54.05 (140)	22.01 (57)	20.46 (53)
Total	3.88 (35)	49.06 (442)	22.53 (203)	24.53 (221)

That said, we can direct our attention to those articles that do exhibit a form of actor bias. Unlike statement bias, there is greater balance in the use of actors backing either the "yes" or the "no" vote choice. At this point, we can look at the chi-square test in Table 5. As we observe, there are significant dependencies between the categories, χ^2 (3, N = 424) = 19.7, p < 0.001). Again, the residuals reveal where the difference is largest among the categories. To visualize this finding, we plotted these Pearson residuals in a mosaic plot (Figure 1). The plot reveals that one media type drives these results. While most media types are within the observed/expected range (shaded in gray), the legacy media departs from the expected distribution; legacy media tend to source significantly less "no vote" actors (red shading) and significantly more "yes vote" actors than expected (blue shading).

Table 5. Standardized Residuals for Actor Bias. Articles that Do Not Use Actors as Sources (No Actors) and Articles in which Actors' Use is Balanced (No Position) Are Excluded.

	Actor bias	
Media type	No vote	Yes vote
Alternative	1.12	−1.07
	(n = 69)	(n = 57)
Legacy	−2.39	2.29
	(n = 52)	(n = 99)
Public broadcaster	1.73	−1.66
	(n = 25)	(n = 12)
Web native	0.60	−0.57
	(n = 57)	(n = 53)

Note. x^2 (3, N = 424) = 19.7, *p* < .001.

Figure 1. Mosaic plot of chi-square residuals for actor bias per media type.

The next step is to run a logistic regression. Here, since our outcome variable is now binary, we can fit a simpler binomial logistic regression. We can also see that the web natives category is the most balanced, with more or less equal proportions. This makes the web native media type a useful reference category. The model's outcome variable is actor bias, favoring the "yes" choice. In the logistic regression (Table 6), we can test further associations in the modeling. Specifically, we can control campaign time. The results of the two models show no significant effect from the control variables. Compared with the more neutral and balanced web natives, only one media type generates significant effects in terms of actor bias: legacy media. Specifically, legacy media is approximately 2.5 times more likely to employ actors advocating the "yes" vote compared with web natives. This finding partially confirms H4: The use of actors supporting the "yes" vote choice was more frequent in legacy media. However, H4 is challenged in relation to the public broadcaster and alternative media, as sourcing proved balanced between the "no" and the "yes" vote choices, disproving the assumption that these two media types would favor actors supporting the "no" vote choice.

Table 6. Logistic Regression on Actor Bias.

Type of media	Dependent variable: Yes vote	
	Models	
	(1)	**(2)**
Alternative	−0.118	−0.121
	(0.262)	(0.262)
Legacy	**0.717*****	**0.744*****
	(0.256)	(0.258)
Public broadcaster	**−0.661***	−0.613
	(0.400)	(0.402)
Time		0.167
		(0.124)
Constant	−0.073	−0.417
	(0.191)	(0.320)
Observations	424	424
Log Likelihood	−283.479	−282.572
Akaike Inf. Crit.	574.957	574.144

Note. *$p < .5$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .005$.
Reference category for the control variable of media type: Web native.

Combined Models

Finally, we sought to unveil whether the two subtypes of partisan bias, namely, statement bias and actor bias, were systematically present in a specific media type. To undertake this analysis, we created a combined model of bias (a new variable). The new variable would take on three values: 0 = no bias detected; 1 = one type of bias detected (either statement or actor bias); and 2 = both types of bias are present. We used the labels "zero bias," "one bias type," and "two bias types" (combined bias) to denote these three types of count data. The mosaic plot of chi-square residuals (Figure 2) revealed the association between each media type and the degree of bias more vividly: Alternative media significantly deviates from the expected distribution. Compared with the other media categories, alternative media included a lower proportion of articles with no bias and a higher proportion of articles with combined bias. Web natives were more impartial compared with the rest, containing a larger proportion of stories with no bias, in contrast to the public broadcaster, who had a less-than-expected count in the combined bias category.
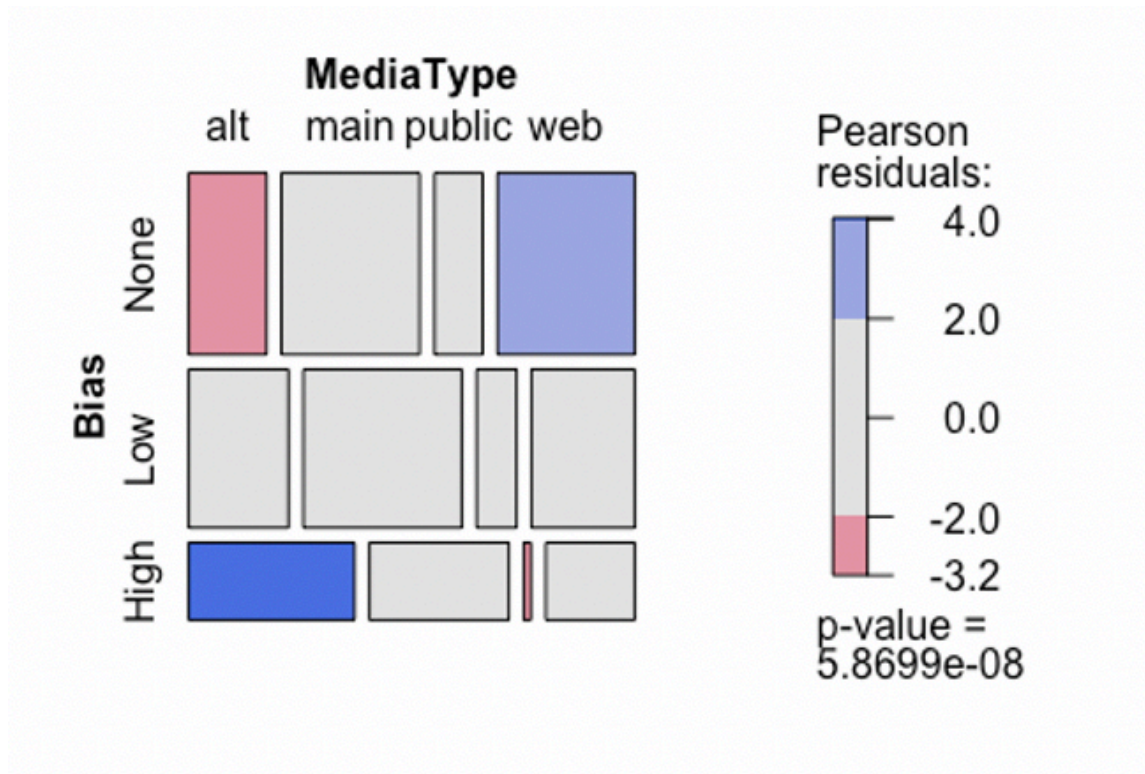
Figure 2. Mosaic Plot of chi-square residuals for combined types of bias per media type.

Although the basic test is quite revealing, it would be useful to go beyond simple chi-square tests and fit more sophisticated models. This requires specifying the outcome variable more fully. The combined bias variable is essentially a count variable with three possible count values. As such, it can be modeled using a Poisson regression, which is well suited for analyzing count data (Table 7). The results do not add much to the simple chi-square test. The most 'bias-contaminated' articles are those published by alternative media (using web natives as the reference category). More specifically, what emerges from the regression is that alternative media are more likely to have a higher count of bias (when compared with web native media), unlike the rest of the media types.

Table 7. Poisson Regression of Combined Bias (Statement and Actor).

	Dependent variable: Degree of overall bias
Alternative	**0.191***
	(0.068)
Legacy	0.083
	(0.064)
Public broadcaster	−0.096
	(0.102)
Time	0.020
	(0.031)
Constant	0.446***
	(0.079)
Observations	901
Log Likelihood	−1,224.169
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,458.339

Note. ****p* < 0.01.
Reference category for the control variable of media type: Web native.

Conclusions and Discussion

With the media playing a key role in referendum campaigns, special attention needs to be paid to media coverage, especially in cases of anecdotal allegations for biased reporting. The presumption underlying the study of media bias is that if the news is slanted, public opinion could be affected. This study understands bias as the advocacy of "yes" and "no" vote choices expressed through statement and actor bias. Drawing on a quantitative analysis of online coverage during the 2015 bailout referendum in Greece, our findings suggest that most articles are free of bias (at least from bias as currently defined). This finding is in line with existing research (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Gulati et al., 2004; Lichter, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2007) arguing that partisan bias is more frequently sought after than empirically confirmed.

While taking this result into account, it has been nonetheless revealing to probe those articles where bias was detected. In this case, the study provides support to other research (Levy et al., 2016; Niven, 1999) claiming a partisan ordering of media outlets (Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010), especially concerning media type. In particular, when exploring statement bias in the 21.8% of the sample where statement bias was identified, we detected a consistent bias toward either the "yes" or the "no" vote positions in relation to the media type; alternative media favored the "no" vote choice in contrast to legacy media, where coverage skewed toward the "yes" vote choice. The exception was the public broadcaster, which can be considered exceptionally neutral, refuting the relevant research that public service media tend to operate as the mouthpiece of the government (Tambini, 2015). However, the analysis revealed different results in the case of actor bias. While alternative media, web natives, and the public broadcaster were found to engage in relatively balanced sourcing practices, legacy media quoted actors advocating the "yes" vote choice more frequently. This finding supports previous research arguing that the visibility of specific actors in the news is conditional on the tone of the coverage (De Vreese & Semetko,

2004b; Van Dalen, 2012). Lastly, when assessing a combined bias outcome, we found that alternative media proved to be the most biased media category.

In an attempt to interpret the findings, a key takeaway is the partisan inclination toward legacy and alternative media. In the former case, it is predominantly performed through sourcing practices. By quoting sources (directly or indirectly) and organizing them into a cohesive narrative, legacy media proved supportive of the status quo (Cline, 2009) and promoted the acceptance of Troika's take-it-or-leave-it bailout proposal. Essentially, the findings corroborate the objectivity-oriented model in which reporters gather (authoritative) information and then present it without explicitly taking a position. It is worth noting that the relative presence of statement bias toward the "yes" vote shows that legacy media were consistent with their general ideological orientation, as all outlets are rather conservative. Moreover, favorable "yes" vote choice reporting increased during the climax of the campaign, probably to help the "yes" camp confirm relevant research (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b). Alternative media, on the other hand, rejected the norm of professional objectivity and engaged in what Atton (2010) calls journalism of commitment (p. 174); being against the continuation of the implemented economic policies, alternative media infused their reporting with a systematic bias in favor of the "no" vote choice, which was again consistent with their overall ideological (left-wing) leaning. This finding empirically supports arguments of alternative media embracing advocacy roles and countering hegemonic discourse as constructed by legacy mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019). The prevalence of statement bias over actor bias with alternative media can also be associated with the production of more analytical and explanatory news stories as opposed to timely, short-form, and epidermic reporting encountered in legacy media and web natives.

About web natives, the study confirms germinal evidence for multiple editorial layering (García-Perdomo et al., 2018), possibly to serve a wider segment of users and to establish themselves as nonpartisan affiliated, a common criticism against legacy media, especially in Greece. Here, we provide evidence reinforcing Bennett's (2016) argument that in today's high-choice media environment, commercial pressures to grab the attention of wider audiences are more important than political slant. Finally, the absence of statement bias in the public broadcaster and its balanced approach about actor visibility should be noted. We believe this is the result of the conscious and attentive efforts by the public broadcaster to shield itself against perpetual criticism of its assumed role as a government mouthpiece (regardless of the party in power). At the same time, the relative predominance of the actors advocating the "no" vote in the public broadcaster may have had important effects, since advocacy by neutral media is more influential for voters compared with "expected" endorsements (Chiang & Knight, 2011).

Taken together, our results provide empirical evidence that in the realm of political information, partisanship is one of the key lines of demarcation among legacy and alternative websites. Although this is not new, partisanship nowadays is also associated with the media's effort to attract a relatively loyal audience (Baum & Groeling, 2008), as people prefer to consume news that aligns with their political views (Tsfati, 2016). Overall, the results suggest that the commercially driven online news landscape (Carlson, 2018) and the presence of multiple news players eroding the monopoly of legacy media create new conditions and values in online newsmaking. Additionally, it could be argued that the production of more neutral reporting is also associated with media attempts to reverse declining trust levels (Newman et al., 2022) and preserve their influence as meaning makers.

The study is not without limitations. One drawback refers to the category of web natives, which may include diverse cases of media outlets (in terms of editorial stance, sourcing practices, ownership, etc.) in which the possible bias present in each outlet may be cancelled out at the aggregate level, so that the overall category appears unbiased. This potential difficulty extends beyond the specific case study, as this recently emerged media type is characterized by diversity and contingency across countries and media systems. Second, the study does not account for the institutional power assigned to different categories of actors, which tend to be the primary definers of events (Hall et al., 1978), irrespective of their editorial stances. Finally, future research should consider the reach of the outlets under scrutiny to provide a more nuanced account of the potential effects on public opinion.

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Appendix

Table 1. Number of Collected Articles About the Bailout Referendum Distributed Across the Eleven News Outlets.

	Outlet	n	%
1	Newsit	925	14%
2	Efimerida Syntakton	383	6%
3	in.gr	709	11%
4	TVXS	680	10%
5	Huffington Post	381	6%
6	To Vima	739	11%
7	Press Project	63	1%
8	Proto Thema	410	6%
9	ERT	740	11%
10	Kathimerini	801	12%
11	e-typos	757	11%
	Total	**6588**	**100%**

Table 2. Number of Collected News Articles Distributed Across the Nine Days of the Campaign.

	Date	n	%
1	June 27	711	11%
2	June 28	643	10%
3	June 29	925	14%
4	June 30	852	13%
5	July 1	869	13%
6	July 2	827	13%
7	July 3	800	12%
8	July 4	395	6%
9	July 5	566	9%
	Total	**6588**	**100%**

Table 3. Random Sample of Articles on The Greek Bailout Referendum Selected From Eleven News Outlets During Nine Days of the Campaign.

Day	27/6	28/6	29/6	30/6	1/07	2/7	3/7	4/7	5/7	**Total**
Newsit	9	10	10	10	11	10	10	10	8	88
Efimerida Syntakton	8	10	10	10	10	10	9	10	9	86
in.gr	10	11	9	10	10	10	9	10	10	89
TVXS	7	8	10	10	12	11	11	9	9	87
Huffington Post	9	10	9	10	9	10	10	10	8	85
To Vima	10	6	8	10	10	10	9	10	7	80
Press Project	2	5	9	7	7	6	10	10	3	59
Proto Thema	10	10	10	10	10	11	9	9	6	85
ert	10	9	10	10	11	9	10	6	9	84
kathimerini	9	10	10	10	9	10	10	10	9	87
e-typos	10	12	10	10	7	6	9	9	9	85
Total	94	101	105	107	106	103	106	103	87	**912**