

## **Which Politicians Pass the News Gates and Why? Explaining Inconsistencies in Research on News Coverage of Individual Politicians**

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Which politicians make it into the news and why? Individual politicians appear more in the news, which is important for their political success. Research concerning news coverage of individual politicians, however, has been conducted with different research designs and little comparative work, which has resulted in contradictory findings. This study examines previous research and has three goals: (1) classify the many possible determinants of news coverage into a typology, (2) give an overview of the effect of the determinants in the typology based on a systematic review of prominent studies, and (3) speculate about explanations for inconsistent findings by examining interaction effects and variations in research designs.

*Keywords: news coverage, politicians, literature review, comparative political communication*

### **Introduction**

Which politicians make it into the news and why? This is the central question in this article and a relevant question in modern politics, where news media play an increasingly central role. Mass media have moved to the center of political processes with a shift from a party democracy to an audience democracy characterized by a more central role of personae (Brants, de Vreese, & Möller, 2010). This trend of candidate-centered politics has influenced political news content: The focus has shifted from parties to politicians and leaders (e.g., McAllister, 2007; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Individual politicians appear more in the news, which is important for their political success. News media play a crucial role in connecting voters to political actors, because citizens often rely only on news media for information about their representatives. Moreover, media coverage might be advantageous during policy-making processes. Legislators use news media to gain public support and influence their counterparts to get legislation passed (Fogarty, 2008; Kedrowski, 1996).

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Although coverage of individual politicians has increased, it still remains a highly selective procedure. Politicians must vie for the attention of reporters, editors, and audiences in a highly competitive news environment (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Scholars have examined which politicians get covered, but these studies have not led to comparable conclusions, because they have been conducted with different research designs and little comparative work. Surprisingly, these mixed outcomes have not instigated a real scholarly debate. The basic question of who gets into the news and why still lacks a clear answer.

Some authors touch upon the problem of contradictory findings. At the beginning of the 1990s, Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) mentioned divergent conclusions and weaknesses. A first problem is "a failure in many studies to control for even the most obvious potentially confounding factors" (p. 812). Midtbø (2011) labels this lack of control variables "omitted variable bias" (p. 227). Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) also noted the short and different time periods studied, which makes it hard to find changing relationships over time. They argue for thinking in terms of patterns of coverage rather than drawing conclusions within a short time frame. A third complication is the focus on politicians' attributes as explanatory variables. The relationship between politicians and journalists is both intertwined and symbiotic, and thus media features cannot be ignored when analyzing news coverage of politicians (Midtbø, 2011, p. 227).

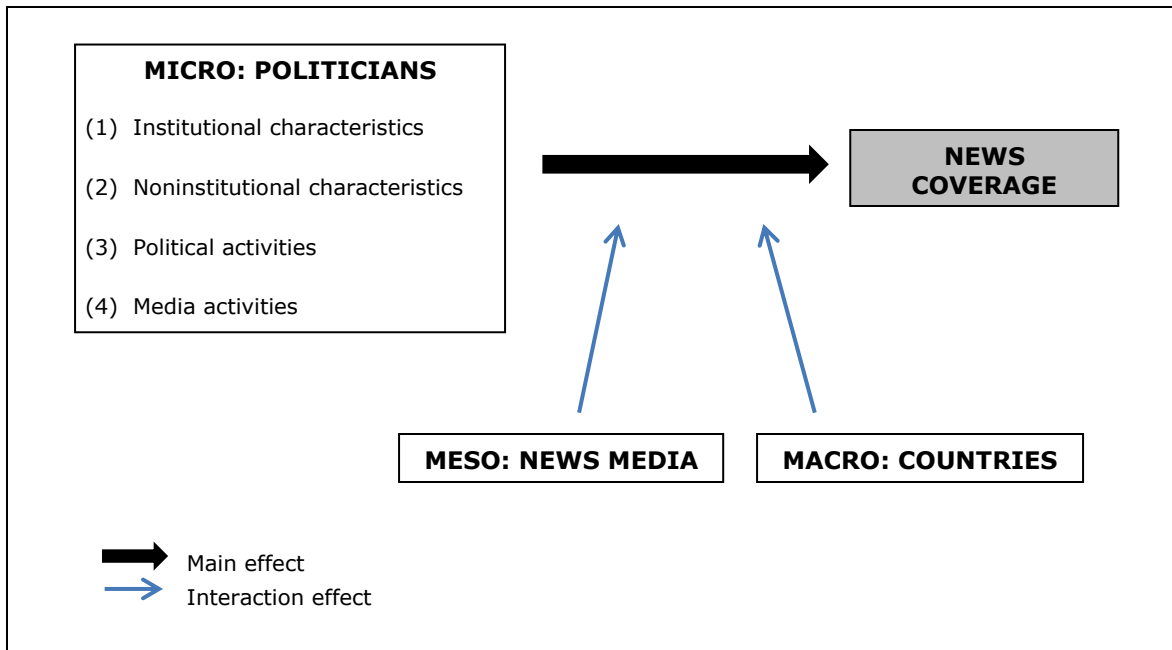
This study examines which politicians pass the news gates and, more specifically, investigates contradictions found in the research. An international perspective is employed to analyze studies around the world and focus on a diverse group of politicians to answer following research question:

*RQ: Why do previous studies on news coverage of individual politicians display inconsistencies concerning the determinants of getting covered?*

To answer this question, three successive steps are conducted. First, determinants of news coverage of politicians are classified to bring some structure to the overwhelming group of possibly influential factors. The typology consists of three levels: the micro level of politicians, the meso level of news media, and the macro level of countries. Second, a literature review is conducted based on a systematic selection of 25 relevant studies, and the variables in the typology are tested for their effect and inconsistencies. Third, we speculate about explanations for the contradictory findings by comparing research designs, and we examine the various theoretical frameworks. This third step takes into account the flaws discussed earlier: (1) We include a wide range of possible determinants to rule out confounding factors; (2) the selected studies were conducted between 1980 and 2012, which allows to find effects over a longer time span; and (3) we examine characteristics of politicians as well as journalistic features, thus taking into account their intertwined relation.

### Typology

The vast number of determinants examined are classified in a meaningful way by distinguishing three levels: (1) characteristics of individual politicians, (2) news media characteristics, and (3) country characteristics. First of all, we focus on the micro-level of politicians themselves. Each politician has specific traits and qualities, leading to more or less coverage. The basic level of the model contains these direct effects of politicians' characteristics and activities on their news coverage. Second, we take media organizations and news events (meso level) and political systems (macro level) into account to examine interaction effects and explain contradictory findings (see Figure 1). Of course, correlations within a level might occur as well as direct effects from the meso and macro levels on news coverage. But the main focus is to determine direct effects of politicians' traits on their coverage and subsequently explore interactions with meso- and macro-level variables.



**Figure 1. Typology of determinants of news coverage.**

### Selection of Studies

To test the typology, we conduct a review of studies on news coverage of politicians. The identification of relevant studies is crucial and followed a strict procedure.<sup>2</sup> To be included, the studies had to meet the following criteria:

- Dependent variable is the amount of news coverage of individual politicians. Studies with coverage of government versus opposition, men and women, and so on as the dependent variable were excluded.
- Type of media is traditional mass media (radio news, newspapers, and television news).
- Time period is between 1980 and 2012.
- Language is English.

The search resulted in 25 prominent studies. This selection is not exhaustive. There might be research in other languages as well as unpublished work on news coverage of individual politicians that is not included. However, the selected studies encompass prominent studies regarding the topic at hand and suffice to put the proposed model to a first test. Table 1 presents a chronological overview of the studies and shows that the analysis of news coverage of politicians is an expanding research field. In general, most studies focus on the micro level solely or on a combination of micro- and meso-level variables. Only Schoenbach, De Ridder, and Lauf (2001) examined all three levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Seven keywords were identified: *news, media, coverage, attention, politician, candidate, and political actor*. Several combinations of these keywords were entered into search engines of suitable databases: Communication Abstracts, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and Web of Science. This resulted in a first group of seven articles. Then each citation and all references in these seven articles were scanned. Other articles of the found authors were checked to verify whether they qualified for inclusion. This search resulted in additional articles, which in turn were scanned for citations, references, and similar work by the author(s). A last additional search was conducted by entering the keywords in Google Scholar.

**Table 1. Overview of Selected Studies.**

Study	Country	Medium	Period	Level
Payne (1980)	United States	NP	Nonelections	Micro
Veblen (1981)	United States	NP	Nonelections	Micro
Cook (1986)	United States	NP TV	Nonelections Elections	Micro Meso
Squire (1988)	United States	NP TV	Nonelections Elections	Micro Meso
Kahn (1991)	United States	NP	Elections	Micro Meso
Kuklinski & Sigelman (1992)	United States	TV	Nonelections Elections	Micro Meso
Haynes & Murray (1998)	United States	Local NP National NP TV	Elections	Micro Meso
Negrine (1999)	Britain Germany	NP TV	Nonelections	Micro Macro
Schoenbach, De Ridder & Lauf (2001)	The Netherlands Germany	TV	Elections	Micro Meso Macro
Sheafer (2001)	Israel	NP TV	Nonelections	Micro
Schaffner & Sellers (2003)	United States	Local NP National NP	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Arnold (2004)	United States	Local NP	Elections Nonelections	Micro Meso
Sheafer & Wolfsfeld (2004)	Israel	Radio	Elections Nonelections	Micro Meso
Wolfsfeld & Sheafer (2006)	Israel	NP	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Sellers & Schaffner (2007)	United States	TV	Nonelections	Micro

			Elections	Meso
Cohen, Tsfati & Sheaffer (2008)	Israel	TV	Nonelections	Micro
Fogarty (2008)	United States	Local NP	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe & Fiers (2008)	Belgium	NP TV	Elections	Micro Meso
Tresch (2009)	Switzerland	NP	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Van Aelst & De Swert (2009)	Belgium	TV	Nonelections Elections	Micro Meso
Tsfati, Elfassi & Waismel-Manor (2010)	Israel	TV	Nonelections	Micro
Midtbø (2011)	Norway	NP	Nonelections Elections	Micro Meso
Waismel-Manor & Tsfati (2011)	United States	NP TV Radio	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Fogarty (2012)	United States	Local NP	Nonelections	Micro Meso
Gershon (2012)	United States	Local NP	Elections	Micro Meso

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*Note.* NP = newspapers; TV = television news.

### Literature Review

This review identifies and examines in a comparative perspective the various characteristics of politicians that have been analyzed frequently over the years. Table 2 presents an overview of the variables investigated in each of the included studies.

**Table 2. Variables and Their Effects in the Selected Studies.**

	Micro								Political work	Media work
	Standing	Seniority	Centrality	Party	Majority	Gender	Age	Attractiveness		
Payne (1980)			✓	✓					x	
Veblen (1981)			✓				✓	✓		
Cook (1986)	✓	✓	✓		x	x	x		x	
Squire (1988)	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Kahn (1991)		✓								
Kuklinski & Sigelman (1992)	✓	✓	✓	x	x					
Haynes & Murray (1998)										
Negrine (1999)	✓									
Schoenbach, De Ridder, & Lauf (2001)	✓									
Sheafer (2001)	✓		✓						x	✓
Schaffner & Sellers (2003)	(✓)				x					
Arnold (2004)	x	x	x	x		x			✓	
Sheafer & Wolfsfeld (2004)	✓									✓
Wolfsfeld & Sheafer (2006)	✓	✓								✓
Sellers & Schaffner (2007)	✓	✓								✓
Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheafer (2008)	✓	x	x		x	x				✓
Fogarty (2008)		x		x					x	x
Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers (2008)	✓			✓	x	✓				

	Micro									Political work	Media work
	Standing	Seniority	Centrality	Party	Majority	Gender	Age	Attractiveness			
Tresch (2009)	✓	x		✓		x				✓	
Van Aelst & De Swert (2009)						✓					
Tsfati, Elfassi, & Waismel-Manor (2010)	✓	✓	x	x		x	x	✓		✓	
Midtbø (2011)	✓	✓		x	x	✓	✓			✓	✓
Waismel-Manor & Tsfati (2011)	✓	(✓)	(✓)	x		x		✓		(✓)	x
Fogarty (2012)										x	✓
Gershon (2012)	(✓)	(✓)		x	x	x				✓	✓

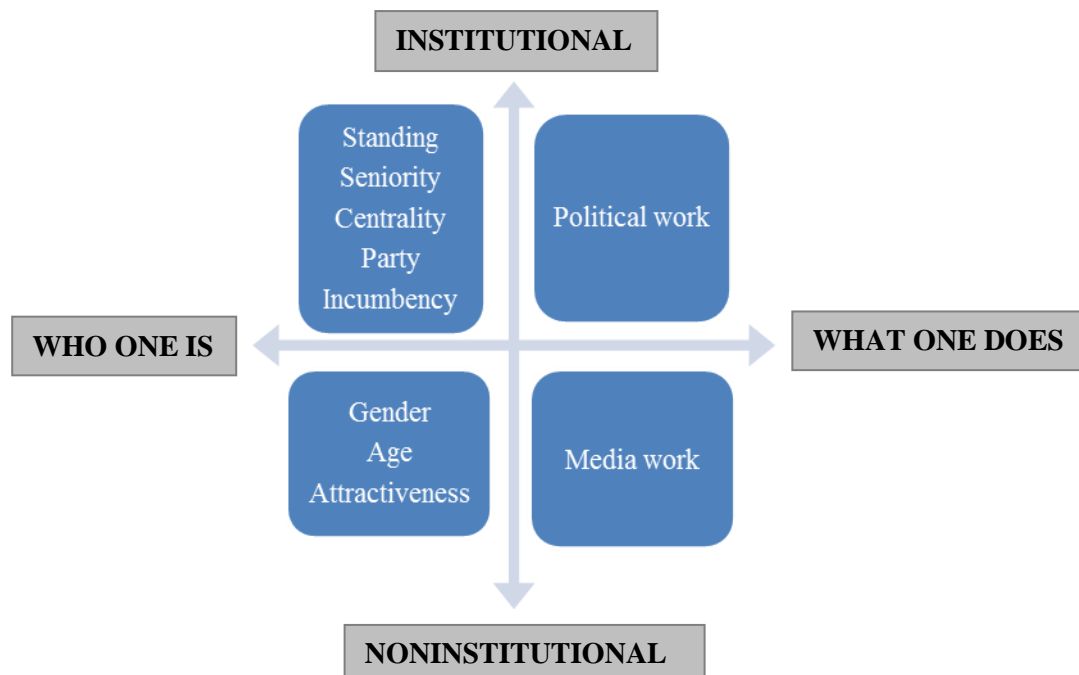
	Meso					Macro
	NP-TV	Local-National	Commercial	Type of event	Election period	Political system
Payne (1980)						
Veblen (1981)						
Cook (1986)	x					
Squire (1988)	✓				✓	
Kahn (1991)					✓	
Kuklinski & Sigelman (1992)					✓	
Haynes & Murray (1998)		x			✓	
Negrine (1999)						✓
Schoenbach, De Ridder, & Lauf (2001)			x		✓	✓



	Meso				Macro	
	NP-TV	Local-National	Commercial	Type of event	Election period	Political system
Sheafer (2001)						
Schaffner & Sellers (2003)		✓	✓			
Arnold (2004)					✓	
Sheafer & Wolfsfeld (2004)					✓	
Wolfsfeld & Sheafer (2006)				✓		
Sellers & Schaffner (2007)				✓		
Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheafer (2008)						
Fogarty (2008)						
Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers (2008)	✓					
Tresch (2009)						
Van Aelst & De Swert (2009)					✓	
Tsfati, Elfassi, & Waismel-Manor (2010)						
Midtbø (2011)		✓	✓			
Waismel-Manor & Tsfati (2011)	✓					
Fogarty (2012)		x	x			
Gershon (2012)			x		✓	

*Note.* ✓ = included in the study and effect; x = included in the study and no effect; an empty cell = not included in the study. Symbols in parentheses indicate very small or contradictory effects.

Scholars have examined several characteristics and activities of politicians to explain their news coverage. We can distinguish between characteristics that define *who a politician is* and *what a politician does*. This distinction corresponds with earlier discussions about the importance of both groups of variables. Early scholars concluded that “what one does in office seems less important for attracting coverage than who one is” (Cook, 1986, p. 221). More recent studies, however, emphasize the importance of activities and argue for a shifting focus “from who they are to what they do” (Midtbø, 2011, p. 230). Tresch (2009, p. 86) argues that both components must be taken into account: “Some parliamentarians have a competitive advantage derived from their official positions. . . . What a parliamentarian is doing and how he or she is doing it might also drive news coverage.” Within these two categories, we can differentiate between institutional and noninstitutional aspects. The institutional attributes are considered to be naturally important for successful politics. Who a politician is *politically* should have the greatest impact on the amount of coverage. Consequently, the effect of political characteristics has been studied frequently and throughout the whole research period. However, who a politician is *personally* is increasingly becoming related to electoral success and getting covered. Nonpolitical traits such as attractiveness are of growing importance (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008).



**Figure 2. Typology of micro-level of politicians.**

### ***Who a Politician Is***

**Institutional characteristics.** The first and clearly most studied variable is political standing. Eighteen studies tested the effect of political standing on the amount of coverage, and 17 of them find a significant effect (see Table 2 for an overview of each variable discussed). This effect has been found in early and contemporary studies; during elections and routine periods; in television, newspapers, and radio coverage; and in different countries such as the United States, Israel, Germany, Norway, Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland. Generally, this variable is measured by looking at politicians' function. Cabinet members, party leaders, and committee chairs have a higher political standing and therefore receive additional coverage. Smaller differences in standing, such as the salience of the committee, also matter for getting covered (Sellers & Schaffner, 2007; Squire, 1988; Tresch, 2009; Waismel-Manor & Tsfati, 2011). In many of these studies, political standing yields the largest significant effect regardless of other control variables (Midtbø, 2011; Sellers & Schaffner, 2007; Squire, 1988; Tresch, 2009; Tsfati et al., 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2008), and including political standing in multiple regression analyses generates high levels of explained variance of .50 or more (Arnold, 2004; Cohen et al., 2008; Schoenbach et al., 2001; Sheafer, 2001; Sheafer & Wolfsfeld, 2004; Tsfati et al., 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2008). However, some authors find a rather small effect of political standing. Schaffner and Sellers (2003) conclude that political standing has a clear effect concerning national newspapers, whereas it yields no significant effect for local newspapers. Gershon (2012) examines local newspapers and comes to the same conclusion. Local newspapers thus focus more on local politicians from their own region or state instead of on politicians with high standing. Arnold (2004) finds a positive and significant effect of being a party leader, but this effect disappears when including the political work of members of Congress.

Another well-investigated variable is seniority. It seems reasonable that politicians with more political experience have more authority and therefore pass the media gates more often. However, the effect of seniority is not straightforward. Nine studies do find a positive effect of longer tenure, but five studies do not. After closer examination, it appears that seniority can have a positive effect on coverage, but mainly during election periods. Studies examining the effect of seniority solely during routine periods do not find a significant effect on coverage (Cohen et al., 2008; Fogarty, 2008; Tresch, 2009). Thus, seniority can be a determinant for getting covered during election periods, but it is of secondary importance during regular periods. This can be explained by electoral positions: Senior politicians are expected to get better positions on electoral lists because they are recognizable by the electorate, leading to additional coverage.

Political centrality has been investigated in 10 studies, all conducted in the United States and Israel. In the United States, the general trend is that more extreme politicians, who stand further from the symbolic center in society, receive additional news coverage. Extreme members might be favored for reasons of colorfulness and balance (Cook, 1986). Two U.S. studies (Arnold, 2004; Squire, 1988), however, do not find a significant effect for extremism, which can be explained by the operationalization of extremism. Squire (1988) uses squares of ADA (Americans for Democratic Action) scores in his model, whereas others use a score of 50 minus the ADA score (Payne, 1980; Veblen, 1981) or an ACA (Americans for Constitutional Action) score (Cook, 1986; Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992). In Israel, political extremism has a smaller effect. Sheafer (2001) concludes that extreme Knesset members get covered

more, but Cohen et al. (2008) and Tsfati and Waismel-Manor (2010) do not find such an effect. Cohen et al. (2008) and Tsfati and Waismel-Manor (2010) include more independent variables such as party and seniority, thereby limiting the remaining effect of extremism.

The effect of party attachment has also been analyzed. Media attention for parties is expected to be proportional to their score in the previous election. Being a member of a party with a great vote share thus could enhance news coverage (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Furthermore, situational factors of the party might matter. Being involved in a scandal or having elections for a new party leader generates more media attention for the party as a whole, and individual members can benefit from it. Yet no clear pattern was found. Payne (1980), Tresch (2009), and Van Aelst et al. (2008) conclude that party attachment has an effect, but many researchers contradict their results. It could be that this effect is only small because other features related to party affiliation have a larger effect. For example, centrality and incumbency are linked to political parties, and since these characteristics show a more clear-cut effect, they might reduce the effect of party attachment.

One political characteristic clearly does not enhance news coverage: belonging to a majority party. Politicians of majority parties do not receive additional coverage, and this pattern remains consistent over earlier studies and more recent studies. Some researchers even find opposite results: Members of minority parties receive more coverage (Schaffner & Sellers, 2003; Van Aelst et al., 2008) than their counterparts of majority parties. There should be an "incumbency bonus" for members of majority parties, but research shows that this bonus is exclusively for members who already hold a high function, such as cabinet members, and not for ordinary politicians, such as members of parliament (De Swert & Walgrave, 2002).

**Noninstitutional characteristics.** Sociodemographic variables such as gender and age were included as control variables in some studies. Concerning gender, eight studies do not find a significant effect, but four do. This inconsistency might be explained by the measurement of political standing. Midtbø (2011), Van Aelst et al. (2008), and Veblen (1981) employed a limited measure of political standing by including a dummy variable of solely one high office function, and Van Aelst and de Swert (2009) do not include political standing in their analyses. Precisely these researchers conclude that women politicians receive less coverage than their male colleagues. The remaining studies included a more elaborate operationalization of political standing and do not find a significant effect of gender. This implies a spurious effect of gender on news coverage, because gender is associated with political standing. When including an exact measurement of political function, women politicians receive approximately the same amount of news coverage. Over time, the novelty of women politicians has waned and the number of women officials has increased. Women have the ability to break through alleged coverage biases, because gender has become only one of many considerations that might influence political news content (Hayes & Lawless, 2013).

Concerning age, Midtbø (2011) and Veblen (1981) conclude that younger politicians receive more coverage, but three other studies did not find an effect. Both studies that find significant effects investigated newspapers coverage, whereas the others examined television news. Surprisingly, being young seems to be an important personal characteristic for making it into newspapers but not for

appearing on television news. All studies also included political tenure in their analyses; thus, effects of age cannot be explained by seniority.

Some recent research has investigated the physical attractiveness of politicians. Being judged as physically attractive is associated with having other socially desirable qualities: Attractive people are considered to be sociable, intelligent, self-assured, and competent (Rosar et al., 2008). These presumed qualities might have a positive effect on getting covered. Tsfati et al. (2010) developed a measurement to gauge physical attractiveness of politicians and found a substantial effect: Good-looking politicians receive more coverage, even when controlling for political standing. Waismel-Manor and Tsfati (2011) replicated these findings in the United States. However, these are two very recent studies, which makes it difficult to decide whether it concerns an enduring robust effect over time.

### ***What a Politician Does***

Not only structural features of politicians explain their amount of coverage; their activities might matter as well. Payne (1980) classifies Congress members as either show horses or work horses and finds that politicians who are media savvy and try to get publicity attain more coverage, whereas more committee attendance does not enhance news coverage. According to Payne (1980), variations in personalities explain the differences in their behavior. Show horses tend to be status types who are oriented toward prestige and enjoy public speaking. Work horses are program types; they are preoccupied with substantive policy questions and enjoy participation in the policy-making process.

**Political work.** Since media are the main channels through which citizens are informed about the accomplishments of their elected officials, we expect news media to monitor their institutional work. News coverage should provide the electorate with essential information to hold elected politicians responsible for their political actions or lack thereof (Sheafer, 2008). For that reason, the political work of politicians should matter for news coverage: The more active one is, the more one gets covered. But the seminal work of Payne (1980) suggests that politically very active politicians receive less media attention. Cook (1986) and Squire (1988) replicate Payne's findings and conclude that sponsoring bills and taking trips to districts do not get a politician rewarded with additional coverage. More recent studies do not find a positive effect of parliamentary activity (Fogarty, 2008, 2012). On the contrary,; some find negative effects, with politicians who are politically very active receiving less coverage (Sheafer, 2001; Tsfati et al., 2010). However, five studies (Arnold, 2004; Gershon, 2012; Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009; Tsfati et al., 2010) do find a significant and positive effect of parliamentary activity, although the effect is rather weak. Contrary to studies conducted in the 1980s, most recent studies conclude that political work can matter for coverage. As such, the effect of being a work horse seems to be growing over time, but still remains modest.

**Media work.** Studies examining the effect of politicians' media work on news coverage are quite recent and do not allow us to examine changing dynamics over time. This corresponds to the growing impact of media logic, whereby news coverage of politics is increasingly autonomously determined by the media and their criteria (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Politicians adapt their activities to media criteria to gain coverage, which has been analyzed only since the beginning of the 21st century.

*Media work* is a broad term encompassing various aspects of politicians' effort to grab journalists' attention. This is reflected in the studies that include different measures of media work. Most authors focus on press releases and letters sent to journalists (e.g., Fogarty, 2012; Gershon, 2012; Midtbø, 2011), but media motivation (Cohen et al., 2008; Sellers & Schaffner, 2007) and charismatic communication skills (e.g., Sheafer, 2001; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006) are also explored. Sheafer (2001) measured charismatic communication skills on several dimensions such as communication innovation and creativity, willingness and ability to cooperate with journalists, and the ability to adjust to the format requirements of specific media.

For the most part, these studies find that politicians who specifically make an effort to get covered do indeed receive more coverage. Politicians who set up interesting pseudo-events, have good contacts with journalists, and send press releases to newsrooms gain additional coverage. Two studies disagree, however (Fogarty, 2008; Waismel-Manor & Tsfaty, 2001). Both are U.S. studies examining the effect of press releases during nonelection periods. This might indicate that sending press releases does not suffice (anymore), but more thorough media investments such as personal contacts are necessary to get reporters' attention.

### **Explanations for Inconsistent Findings**

The literature review indicates that research concerning news coverage of politicians has been conducted with differing designs, leading to contradictory results and making comparisons difficult. To account for inconsistencies, we discuss the main variations in research designs and their consequences for the results.

#### ***Medium***

A first distinction can be made concerning the type of medium. Newspaper coverage differs from television news; they have different formats, goals, and audiences. Television air time is a limited resource, so television news has more constraints than newspapers for covering a large number of politicians (Meyrowitz, 1994). Moreover, television is a highly visual medium, and television journalists search for news with good visual resources (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Eunyi, & Wrigley, 2001). Consequently, the appearance and eloquence of politicians might be valued more for television news. Some studies indeed find different results according to the type of medium: Politicians from bigger states (Squire, 1988), women politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2008), and attractive politicians (Waismel-Manor & Tsfaty, 2011) gain more coverage on television news than they do in newspapers.

Second, local media outlets might cover different politicians than national media outlets. Local media workers can follow news content of national newspapers and television stations. But more likely, they follow divergent news routines to select news sources. Their decisions about coverage might hinge less on politicians' political standing and more on their closeness and availability. Furthermore, politicians can maintain closer relations with local reporters from their district, leading to more access and more attention. The relationship is more symbiotic, because local journalists have fewer political contacts than national journalists and politicians need visibility in their home region to obtain votes (Larson, 1992).

Meyrowitz (1994) discusses in this respect two different logics. On the one hand, there is a national journalistic logic that is rather restrictive in covering a narrow set of major politicians. The local journalistic logic, on the other hand, is more open for less-known politicians. Haynes and Murray (1998) and Fogarty (2012) conclude that local and national newspapers have a comparable political content. Midtbø (2011) and Schaffner and Sellers (2003), however, find that local newspapers focus less on politicians with high standing and more on local politicians.

### ***Event***

Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) discuss which types of political waves provide opportunities for which political actors. Political waves begin with a triggering event and result in extensive media coverage, with political actors trying to ride the wave. In closed waves, with more cultural conflict and less news space, individuals closely linked to the story and its conflicts are more likely to get covered. This relates to the concept of "thematic relevance"—or the extent to which a political actor's position can be linked to the event (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006, p. 339). Journalists thus tend to choose well-established politicians who are knowledgeable about the theme at hand. In more open waves, however, associated with little ideological or cultural conflict, good communication skills and media work can enhance politicians' chances to receive coverage. Open waves thus allow more general access to news media, with a broader group of politicians making it into the news.

Furthermore, journalistic gatekeeping practices might change when news is event driven. Event-driven news reports on activities that are not managed by officials in institutional settings, but rather originate spontaneously. Consequently, journalists will rely less on officials for selecting political news content when these unplanned actions occur (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Event-driven news contrasts with pseudo-events, which are not spontaneous but carefully planned to appeal to journalists. Press conferences are such events staged by officials to facilitate news production routines and deadlines (Livingstone & Bennett, 2003). In pseudo-events, political actors with greater political standing will be the main news sources, because they are the principal players concerning the event at hand. However, a trade-off might exist between carefully planning an event and the newsworthiness of the event. During press conferences, officials want to transmit the desired message and attempt to set the topic, but their lengthy and scripted statements are less likely to produce unexpected information or good sound bites. Politicians—especially the less powerful ones—thus should consider the type of event they participate in when trying to get attention. By reducing their control over the content of an event, they enhance the newsworthiness and the freedom of journalists. Less-controlled types of press events are studio interviews or stakeouts when leaving parliamentary hearings (Sellers & Schaffner, 2007).

### ***Election Period***

News content is different in election periods compared to routine periods. Political actors are more active to win additional coverage, and the media devote more attention to politics, opening opportunity windows for politicians. Journalists also pay more attention to rules on balance and objectivity (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), which should lead to a more equal distribution of political news sources during elections. Indeed, during election campaigns, news media cover more women politicians, more

politicians from ethnic minorities, and fewer political leaders (Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992; Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009).

Moreover, during election periods, other factors come to play, such as campaign spending, the intensity of political campaigns, and election polls (Arnold, 2004). For example, the competitiveness of the race can influence which politicians get covered. Contested races generate more media coverage and show different actors. Representatives who run unopposed receive less coverage than representatives who face a challenger (Arnold, 2004). When they do face a challenger, incumbent candidates generally receive more coverage than their challengers, but in competitive races, the press treats incumbents and challengers as equals (Gershon, 2012; Kahn, 1991). Also candidate performances in polls matter during election campaigns, with most attention going to front-runners (Haynes & Murray, 1998).

### **Country**

Concerning news coverage of individual politicians, only two comparative studies have been conducted. They examined interaction effects between political standing and the political system in a country. Schoenbach et al. (2001) compared the Netherlands and Germany and identified two possible influences of the political system: political culture and the amount of parties. The Netherlands has a "consensus culture" of decision making, because Dutch governments traditionally consist of several ideologically different parties. Related to this, more parties are represented in the Dutch parliament than in the German parliament. The results show that political function is a smaller determinant of news coverage in the Netherlands than in Germany. In Germany, the head of government—the chancellor—and party leaders get almost all the coverage, whereas Dutch cabinet members and leaders of Dutch parliamentary party groups also receive a fair amount of coverage. The authors state that the Netherlands has a more equal-access approach and Germany has a rather presidential approach.

Negrine (1999) studied Germany and Britain. In Britain, party leaders—especially those of government parties—are becoming increasingly visible in television news. For Germany, he concludes that the chancellor gains most coverage by far. However, he finds that a selection of cabinet members—not party leaders, as Schoenbach et al. (2001) had concluded—come in second place. A possible explanation is the period under investigation: Schoenbach et al. (2001) analyzed election weeks, when party leaders become more prominent, whereas Negrine (1999) examined a routine period. Overall, it appears that certain political functions gain additional coverage according to a country's political system.

In the literature review, 14 U.S. studies and 5 Israeli studies are included, making a comparison within and between these countries possible. Although studies conducted in one single country also apply other research designs, some general conclusions can be made. In both countries, political standing is the most influential variable; being a member of a majority party and gender do not increase coverage in the United States nor in Israel. A more interesting finding concerns the importance of parliamentary work on the one hand and media work on the other. In Israel, media work seems to be more crucial than parliamentary work for getting covered, whereas the reversed pattern occurs in the United States. A plausible explanation can be found in the medium investigated: U.S. studies focus mainly on (local) newspapers, whereas Israeli studies analyze television news more. As mentioned earlier, television is a



highly visual medium (Shoemaker et al., 2001), making communication skills and rhetoric more central. Politicians with appealing messages are more likely to become television news sources. Newspapers, on the other hand, have more space to cover substantial policy decisions and therefore write more elaborately about politicians' political accomplishments.

### Theoretical Foundations

The literature review reveals much diversity in research designs. Likewise, authors build on various theoretical frameworks, although three main theories come across: (1) news values and news routines, (2) media logic, and (3) media economy.

Most studies (e.g., Cook, 1986; Midtbø, 2011; Sheafer & Wolfsfeld, 2004; Tresch, 2009) build their theory and hypotheses upon the traditional paradigm of news values and news routines (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Generally, news values determine whether information is worthy of news space, whereas news routines provide procedural shortcuts that reinforce news values and enable news outlets to make timely decisions about newsworthiness (van Dalen, 2012). Galtung and Ruge's (1965) question about how events become news can be applied to our main question: How do political actors become news? The authors listed 12 news values peculiar to how journalists and editors select news. The news value of an event or person is a result of its specific properties, such as elite character, negativity, and unexpectedness.

Not all politicians are equally newsworthy: The more news values a politician displays, the greater his or her newsworthiness. The strong effect of political standing illustrates this. Politicians with high political standing become news sources frequently, which is compatible with four news values. In selecting news sources, journalists seek officials who occupy authoritative positions in decision-making processes—that is, *elite people*. These powerful politicians have more interesting information to deliver and have the authority to act upon it, which can affect many citizens, making them and their actions *meaningful* (Bennett, 1996). Furthermore, they contribute to the *continuity* of news, because they have been news sources before and their appearance is *consonant* with preexisting ideas of the audience about political processes.

In addition to relying on news values, journalists and editors follow some journalistic routines when covering news, such as rules on fairness, balance, and impartiality (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). These rules might change over time, making certain news values more important than others. Changing political and news environments can lead to slightly adjusted selection patterns of political news sources. For example, the threshold for newsworthiness tends to rise when the legislature is in recess, which advantages those who are high in the political hierarchy. During election periods, however, politicians have a more equal chance of getting covered because reporters pay more attention to balanced reporting (Sheafer & Wolfsfeld, 2004).

News value theory has been criticized for its notion of passive media that automatically respond to external and presumably objective properties of events. Media organizations act not passively, but their

news decisions reflect the media's own working mechanisms, preferences, and interests (Tresch, 2009), as media logic theories as well as media market theories assert.

The second theory is media logic. Altheide and Snow (1979) introduced the concept of "media logic." which determines "how material is organized, the style in which it is presented . . . and the grammar of media communication" (p. 10). Events, actors, and media frames need to fit the medium and lead to good stories. The structure of a good story highlights colorful events, fiction-like storylines, strategy, and personalities (Sheafer, 2001). Studies building on media logic (e.g., Cohen et al., 2008; Sheafer, 2001; Van Aelst et al., 2008) assume that politicians who attend to production needs and requirements of media organizations have a better chance of getting covered. This is in line with our finding that media work matters for gaining publicity.

A third approach in studies of news coverage of politicians concerns media economy and the media market. News organizations are seen as rational economic actors who balance two elements: the cost of attaining information on the actor and the benefit from reporting this information to the public. They have limited time, space, and resources and select news to serve their own purposes and market interests. In an ever more competitive media market, news organizations try to respond to the preferences of the audience to attract their attention (Fogarty, 2008; Tresch, 2009). One way of doing so is to turn to legislators from their own market district. Studies show that parliamentarians may win more coverage when their districts are highly congruent with the media market of a news organization (Fogarty, 2008; Schaffner & Sellers, 2003).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

By conducting a literature review and explaining inconsistencies, this article contributes to the discussion about which politicians pass the news gates. In this conclusion, we put forth what we currently know, discuss what is still missing, and suggest how to resolve these issues.

Overall, journalists follow "the trail of power" (Bennett, 1996). Politicians with prominent political positions can be guaranteed a firm place in the news spotlight. News media are mainly guided by political logic when selecting political news sources and thus mainly passive channels of information distribution that follow and reinforce existing hierarchical structures. This process ultimately leads to "a self-perpetuating cycle of coverage and influence" (Tresch, 2009, p. 85). However, political power is not always equally important. Depending on the type of medium, the type of event, and the time period, journalists may diverge from the trail of power. This emphasizes the necessity to pay attention to interactions between politicians and the characteristics of news media.

Politicians who cannot rely on high political standing can adapt to media logic as a compensation mechanism for their lower news value. Media logic plays a role in dividing attention between political actors, but only as an additional mechanism when political logic does not suffice. Media logic is thus not omnipresent in political news content but nevertheless becomes increasingly intertwined with political logic. Political actors have come to understand media logic, and they adjust their actions and decisions to it—a tactic often labeled as "mediatization" of politics (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

Despite these general findings, the studies also display contradictory results. We analyzed which inconsistencies are present, how to explain them, and what is still missing. We conclude that four features of research designs account for inconsistent results: the medium, the type of event, the period, and the country. Depending on these features, some determinants of news coverage become more important, whereas the effect of others declines. This finding emphasizes the significance of interaction effects between micro-, meso-, and macro-level elements. However, interactive patterns between features of politicians have been ignored so far. Likewise, authors mainly test linear effects while neglecting the possible existence of nonlinear effects on news coverage. Both patterns can be relevant, though, and connect to the theory of news values. The presence, absence, or combination of certain news values can modify news source selection. As Galtung and Ruge (1965) state: "These twelve factors are not independent of each other: there are interesting inter-relations between them" (p. 71).

In addition to the need for a focus on interactive and nonlinear patterns, some other recommendations for future research can be made. First, researchers must incorporate political function in their designs to rule out spurious relations. Political standing influences news coverage and thus needs to be controlled when analyzing other determinants of coverage of politicians.

Second, much research has been done on the micro level of individual politicians. Yet results concerning politicians' attractiveness need to be validated further. More importantly, politicians' use of new media should be incorporated in future studies. Political actors can apply new media such as websites to attract coverage in traditional media (Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004). Today, journalists and politicians are increasingly communicating through online social platforms such as Twitter, which might change media access and coverage patterns. After all, the majority of tweets from politicians appear to be mini press releases including links with further descriptions on the topic (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010).

Third, and concerning the meso level, academics need to focus on journalists in addition to organizational factors. In general, journalists base their decisions of newsworthiness on implicitly shared news norms. These news values are not binding, however, and reporters' subjective beliefs might influence their judgments. Their predispositions can lead to selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention (Donsbach, 2004). News events consistent with journalists' own opinions are attributed a higher news value (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991), and applied to news sources, we can expect that journalists and editors more often select political actors who share their opinions. Sociodemographics also might influence professional decisions. New journalists have diverse beliefs and priorities consistent with their gender, age, and ethnicity, which can lead to a different socialization into the workplace. For example, news from women reporters consists of a more women sources (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Wagner, 2010).

Finally, more comparative research is needed. Countries have specific news content according to their political system, political culture, and media system. The research of Balmas and Sheafer (2013) on political personalization reveals the growing importance of individuals in contemporary political institutions as well as in news coverage. They argue for an international perspective on news coverage of political leaders, where different news values and country features have a combined influence on the construction of political news. Research in related domains indicates political system features worthwhile to investigate

concerning news coverage of politicians, such as the number of seats in parliament, the strength of parliament (van Dalen, 2012; Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, Van Aelst, & de Vreese, 2010), and the strength of parties.

To conclude, we remark that this study explains news coverage of politicians by means of a literature review. We attempt to decipher why factors are significant in some studies and not in others by comparing studies, but we do not include additional data collection or hypothesis testing. The study is thus speculative in nature. However, the literature review and speculations are valuable as a relevant starting point for further hypothesis testing to explain inconsistencies in the research on news coverage of politicians.

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