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Lying press: Three levels of perceived media bias and their relationship with political preferences

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Abstract: In the context of decreasing media trust as well as the rise of populist movements in many Western Democracies, this study sets out to revisit the relationship between political preferences and perceived media bias. It investigates perceived bias of the entire media system, the perceived bias of individual outlets as well as perceived beneficiaries of this favorable coverage. Analyses are based on an online survey in Austria in 2015 ($n \sim 1,679$) and compare citizens' perceived biases towards eight newspapers and television outlets. Results show that media system bias in Austria is strongly related to right-wing but not to left-wing extremism. Furthermore, there are not only differences between single outlets but also between media genres, as particularly tabloids are less afflicted by right-wing perceptions of bias. Finally, there is evidence of hostile media perceptions irrespective of actual media exposure.

Keywords: perceived media bias, media credibility, hostile-media phenomenon

1 Introduction

Over the last decades, citizens' trust in mainstream media has been declining in many developed countries (see Bennett, Rhine, and Flickinger, 2001; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Kioussis, 2001). This is alarming since citizens who do not trust the media are not only less open to being informed by them (Miller and Krosnick, 2000; Tsfat, 2003), but also may become less inclined to accept democratic principles and to trust the democratic system itself (Tsfati and Cohen, 2005). Key to the media's perceived trustworthiness is the belief that they supply voters with balanced and objective information on relevant political issues and actors (McQuail, 1992). However, news media are often accused of partisanship and biased reporting, especially during election campaigns. Such bias can be

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both objective, in the sense that issues and actors are actually *presented* and *discussed* in an unbalanced and slanted way, as well as subjective, in the sense that audiences *perceive* the news as favoring some parties or ideologies over others. This study investigates perceived media bias in more detail based on three different conceptual levels.

Previous studies mostly explored perceptions of the media in general terms (e.g., Eveland and Shah, 2003; Lee, 2010; Tsfatı and Cohen, 2005), while only more recent work distinguishes between media genres and formats, and finds that explanatory factors for individuals' perceptions clearly differ between them (e.g., Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck, 2015). An even more specified inquiry would therefore not only ask about the bias of the media in general or of particular news outlets, but it would also ask about the nature of the perceived bias, that is, which parties are perceived to be benefitting from such biases of different outlets. This is particularly relevant when studying perceived media bias in multi-party systems, where single media outlets may potentially be biased towards not just one of two but also towards a multitude of parties. This study thus aims for a more nuanced understanding of media bias and a more fine-grained empirical inquiry, focusing on different layers of perceived media bias.

While research explaining media trust and its determinants is growing (e.g., Lee, 2010; Tsfatı and Ariely, 2014), research on the sources of perceived media bias is still sparse, even more so outside of the United States (e.g., Boomgaarden and Semetko, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2015). Yet among them, studies focusing on individual-level determinants stress the explanatory value of extreme ideological and political preferences. Other studies also suggest that once media bias is perceived, media contents and the valence of such contents are likely to be seen as hostile to one's own political views (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985). Other studies suggest that perceived media bias is higher particularly among conservative or right-leaning citizens (e.g., Eveland and Shah, 2003; Lee, 2010). However, it remains unclear how this research translates to European media and multiparty systems. With the recent reverberation of the battle cry "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*) throughout the political and media landscape in Europe as well as the United States, where the media are accused of being biased in favor of the political establishment, media bias has turned into a strongly partisan accusation that needs to be revisited in more detail (Dostal, 2015; The Economist, 2016).

In order to address these gaps, this study investigates and compares the effects of ideological and party preferences on perceived media bias on three different conceptual layers: (1) perceived bias of the media in general, (2) perceived bias of specific news outlets, and (3) perceived beneficiaries of outlet-

specific bias. This study is also among the first to map influences on perceived media bias in Austria, a country with above-average media bias and strong political ties between media and politics (e.g., Eberl, Boomgarden, and Wagner, 2015; Lelkes, 2016); however, we know relatively little about citizens' perceptions of media bias. Analyses draw on a cross-sectional online survey carried out in an off-election period in 2015.

By investigating three different layers of perceived media bias, this study makes three important contributions to extant literature. First, it investigates to what extent media bias perceptions in a European multi-party system are politically imbalanced compared to the United States and thus driven by one ideological side alone. An alternative theory sees it motivated by both sides of the ideological extremes. Second, it particularly addresses differences in media bias perceptions based on citizens' political preferences as well as different media outlets and different media genres. Finally, it probes how strongly bias perceptions are actually tied to media exposure and thus discusses implications of these findings for journalism and democracy.

2 Objective versus perceived media bias

One approach to understanding perceived media bias is to turn to news content itself. If citizens find media to be biased in favor or against any specific party or ideology, it is fair to assume that this perceived bias may originate from the visibility of and tone used towards these parties or candidates, or from the treatment of these parties' policy issues in the media coverage itself. Particularly in the United States, the accusation of a liberal media bias – that is, media coverage in general being slanted in favor of liberal candidates, parties and policies – has persisted for a long time. However, meta-analyses found contradicting evidence for this criticism of US-media coverage (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000; Lott and Hassett, 2004). Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) further argue that this belief in biased media is continuously reproduced and reinforced by an increase in the media's self-coverage about allegations of a liberal bias and not by actual biased coverage itself.

Any studies seeking to match bias perceptions with an objective level of bias in news content have to set some sort of a normative benchmark of what balanced or impartial news is (e.g., Hopmann, Van Aelst, and Legante, 2011). However, what scholars may normatively and empirically identify as such may be different from what individuals perceive as balanced and impartial. Instead, citizens may use partisan and other in-group cues as well as personal day-to-day experiences to infer reality, and compare it to its depiction in media cover-

age (e.g., Mutz and Martin, 2001). The relationship between objective and perceived media bias is thus uncertain at best, and it seems that individual-level differences in perceptions may be of greater relevance than actual media content (Eveland and Shah, 2003).

3 General perceived media bias: A question of extremism or right-wing ideology?

Political attitudes and ideology strongly determine citizens' media perceptions. Gunther (1988) argues that the intensity and extremity of political attitudes is an important predictor of perceived bias. Following this argument, both citizens from the left and the right ideological extremes should have more negative perceptions of news coverage than those who hold less extreme attitudes. Similarly, Reinemann and Fawzi (2016) argue that citizens who distrust the media and accuse them of being systematically biased are the same citizens who tend to vote for populist and extremist parties, seeing the media as part of the establishment and favoring mainstream politics. Tsfaty and Cappella (2005) shed some light on possible mechanisms of how the extremes on both sides drive media skepticism, which is itself strongly related to perceived media bias (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). They find that, in the United States both left- and right-wing extremists more strongly expose themselves to non-mainstream media, which in turn negatively affects their trust in mainstream media. A very similar indirect relationship between ideological extremism and trust in media was found in Israel (Tsfaty and Peri, 2006), where parties with extreme positions – both from the left and the right ideological spectrum – play a more important role in a multi-party system. In light of these findings the first hypothesis is that *general perceptions of biased media will be stronger among ideological extremists compared to more moderate individuals* (H1a).

Literature on media perceptions is often focused on the United States and the alleged “liberal bias” of mainstream media, wherein mainstream media is used synonymously for the media in general. Studies then find that this accusation of media bias is particularly expressed by voters with a strong Republican Party identification as well as more generally by voters who are on the right of the ideological spectrum (e.g., Beck, Dalton, Greene, and Huckfeldt, 2002; Eveland and Shah, 2003; Lee, 2010). Although the general argument of attitude intensity or extremity remains the same, findings here suggest that predominantly right-leaning voters are more prone to perceive the media as biased than left-leaning voters. Findings from Sweden relating perceptions of left-wing (but

not right-wing) bias to a decline in media trust support this political one-sidedness of media perceptions (Hopmann et al., 2015, p. 789). Given the (re-)production of the accusation of liberal media bias in the form of the “Lügenpresse” by recent right-wing extremist and so-called alt-right movements across Europe and the US (e.g., Gasser, 2016; The Economist, 2016), an alternative hypothesis is that *general perceptions of biased media will be stronger among right-leaning than among left-leaning individuals* (H1b).

4 Perceived media outlet bias: A partisanship of audiences?

Believing the media *in general* is biased may be very different from perceiving *specific outlets* to be biased. While media ownership and market pressures will lead some outlets to either take a clear stance towards political advocacy or balanced reporting (see Hackett, 1984, p. 239), news corporations may also continuously vary their news content in response to economic pressures, technological developments, and audience preferences (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010).

Content analyses in Europe as well as in the United States show that news outlets often differ in their coverage of parties and candidates during election campaigns (e.g., Druckman and Parkin, 2005; Eberl et al., 2015; Takens, Ruigrok, Van Hoof, and Scholten, 2010). While D'Alessio and Allen (2000) found no evidence of a liberal media bias in the United States in their meta-analysis, this does not mean that there is no relationship between perceived bias and objective bias on the level of *single outlets*. In fact, Boomgaarden and Semetko (2012) found a modest relationship between the actual content of specific news outlets and audiences' perceptions of it in Germany. Following the notion of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 28), distinct political news content should influence the partisanship of audiences mirroring the political bias of media content. This partisanship of audiences can be expressed both through media exposure as well as media perceptions. This further implies that news outlets will not only have an audience that shares their political views, but that these partisan audiences will perceive them as being more objective in their reporting. We therefore have to expect that *the effect of an individual's political preferences on their perceived media outlet bias will vary from media outlets to media outlet* (H2). The theoretical argument being that when an outlet has, for example, a conservative bias, conservative audiences should perceive it as less biased.

5 Perceived outlet-party bias: A hostile media phenomenon?

Knowing which partisans perceive a media outlet to be biased will already convey an idea of the perceived political leaning of a news outlet, especially when biased reporting is understood as something exclusively objectionable. However, asking about the beneficiary of an outlet's bias (i.e., which party is actually perceived as being favored) is again potentially very different from perceived outlet bias, especially in a multi-party system, where party preferences may be complex and diverse and where citizens may not only prefer one and dislike another, but prefer and dislike several parties – even from different sides of the ideological spectrum.

Although recent literature discusses evidence that sometimes even partisans may admit to perceiving congenial media bias (Boomgaarden and Semetko, 2012), the large bulk of the literature argues that audiences will perceive media to be almost always hostile to their political views (e.g., Hansen and Kim, 2011; Vallone et al., 1985). There can be a number of reasons for this. First, following the selective recall argument, partisans are more likely to *remember* aspects of the content that are hostile to their own position. Second, selective categorization argues that partisans will *assign* different valences to similar content. Even small criticisms will then seem like a strong negative bias. Third, the different standards explanation says that partisans *assess* their own political attitudes and viewpoints as more credible, correct and newsworthy, which makes balanced reporting that gives equal space to several arguments seem by definition biased and hostile (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia, 2001; Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart, 2004). All these studies focus on partisans, a dichotomous concept that is becoming less and less relevant in multi-party systems with increasing numbers of parties and swing voters (Van der Meer, van Elsas, Lubbe, and van der Brug, 2013). To better fit the context of multi-party systems, this study therefore takes the focus away from partisans and puts it on more general party preferences. Knowing that voters may like and dislike several parties at the same time, *we expect that the probability of naming any party as being favored in the media coverage of a particular news outlet decreases with an individual's general preference for that party* (H3).

6 The case of Austria

By and large research dealing with perceived media bias and related concepts focuses on the United States (e.g., Eveland and Shah, 2003; Lee, 2005, 2010;

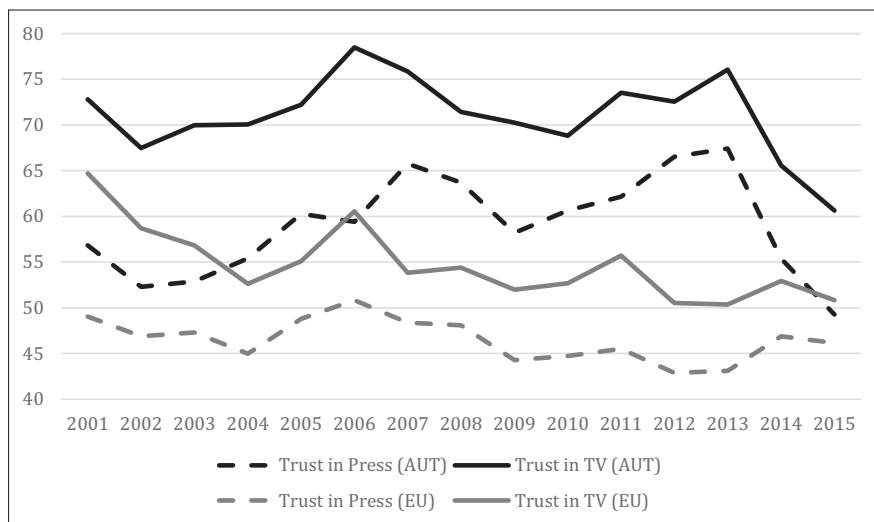


Figure 1: Media trust in Austria and Europe, in percent (2001–2015).

Source: Media trust scores are based on Eurobarometer data from 2001 to 2015 and are represented as the relative number of respondents who said that they “tend to trust” the respective media of all respondents either trusting or not trusting the respective media (European Commission, 2017).

Watts et al., 1999). This study is an important contribution in this regard, since perceiving media bias in a two-party system towards either one or the other party/candidate is by definition much less complex than media bias perceptions in a multi-party system such as Austria.

Austria has a democratic-corporatist media system with a strong newspaper market and public broadcasting sector, similar to larger European countries such as Germany or Great Britain (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Political parallelism in the Austrian media system is a little above the European average, particularly when it comes to print media (Lelkes, 2016). Nonetheless, overall media trust in Austria has been well above the European average over the past decades (see Figure 1). However, there was a strong decline in media trust after the last general election in 2013, about the same time as the Austrian far-right Freedom Party started taking the lead in national polls and another right-wing populist party, the Team Stronach, was elected into parliament. Although media trust in Austria is still high, the apparent downward slope is striking.¹

¹ Note that Eurobarometer statistics from 2016 show that media trust both in Austria and in the EU seems to be slowly recovering or, at least, not to be plummeting further.

According to the Reuters Digital News Report (2016, p. 63) only 24 % of respondents think that Austrian media are free from undue political influence.

7 Data and methods

Data collection took place between October 14 and November 25, 2015, during a non-election period in Austria. Respondents for the cross-sectional online survey were drawn randomly from an existing opt-in online access panel based on key demographics representing the target population. Since the survey was part of a longitudinal election panel that started in 2013, 591 fresh respondents were added to address the low initial response rate of 49.4 %. The profile of the final sample was largely in line with the overall population, with minor discrepancies concerning age and region that reflect the usual patterns of such online surveys (Kritzing et al., 2016). Conditional on the conceptual levels of perceived media bias, the remaining subsamples used for the analyses contained between 1,243 and 1,460 respondents.

7.1 Three layers, three types of perceived media bias and three dependent variables

Since this study investigates perceived media bias on three different conceptual levels, three different measures are used as dependent variables. First, perceived *media bias in general* is measured by asking respondents how much they agree with the statement “Austrian media are biased” (1–4: “completely disagree”, “somewhat disagree”, “somewhat agree” and “completely agree”). After dropping cases with missing values for the relevant independent variables, the remaining subsample contains 1,679 respondents. Second, to measure perceived *media outlet bias*, respondents are asked whether news coverage in each out of seven outlets² was slanted in favor of *any* parties or their politics (0/1). Finally, on the level of perceived *media outlet bias*, respondents who perceived outlets to have a favorable slant towards *specific* parties or their politics were asked which of the six parties that held seats in the national parliament were being favored (0/1). Respondents were allowed to identify a slant

² The media sample contains a variety of different types of outlets selected on the basis of circulation figures, format and genre. The outlets under study are the quality newspapers *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*, the tabloids *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich*, and *Heute*, as well as the public broadcasting newscasts *Zeit im Bild 1* and *Zeit im Bild 2*.

towards more than one party. For the analysis of perceived outlet-party bias the data has been stacked by parties.

7.2 Analyses and model specifications

The main independent variables include a respondent's ideological self-placement on the left-right scale (0–10, mean = 4.8, $SD = 2.1$) as well as a squared form of the variable to allow for non-linear effects of ideology. Also included is the propensity to vote (PTV) for each of six political parties on a scale from 0 to 10 as a measure of party preferences. Politically the six parties can be qualified as follows: The most leftist party in the Austrian Parliament is the Greens (Grüne). A newly formed liberal party (NEOS) occupies the ideological space between the two traditional parties, that is, the Social Democrats (SPÖ, center left) and the People's Party (ÖVP, center right). Finally, there is the above-mentioned Team Stronach (TS, populist-right) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ, far-right).

The analyses include a large number of control variables that help establish a plausible baseline to address alternative explanations. Socio-demographic variables as well as interest in politics have been shown to impact media perceptions, although the significance and direction of the effects vary sometimes greatly between studies (e.g., Eveland and Shah, 2003; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). Therefore, age (in years, mean = 45, $SD = 15.7$), gender (0/1, 1 = female, 52% are female), highest level of formal education (1–4, mean = 2.7, $SD = 0.9$)³ and political interest (1–4, “not interested at all” to “very interested”, mean = 2.9, $SD = 0.8$) are included. There appears to be a positive relationship between the media use of traditional (print, television and radio) and mainstream sources, and trust in media in general (e.g., Fletcher and Park, forthcoming; Hopmann et al., 2015; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014; Tsfati and Cappella, 2005). In the perceived bias analysis of *media in general*, controls thus also include newspaper (1–5, mean = 3.7, $SD = 1.3$), TV (1–5, mean = 3.9, $SD = 1.2$), radio (1–5, mean = 3.6, $SD = 1.4$) and online news use (1–5, mean = 3.8, $SD = 1.3$)⁴ as well as a variable that controls for social media use (0/1, 71% social media). In the perceived *media outlet bias* and *outlet-party bias* models, media use was measured as

³ Highest formal level of education was coded in a way so that (1) represents respondents without a school leaving certificate, (2) represents respondents with vocational training, (3) respondents with a school leaving certificate, and (4) respondents with a university degree.

⁴ All these media-use variables were scaled as (1) “close to daily”, (2) “several times a week”, (3) “several times a month”, (4) “less frequently”, and (5) “never”. No particular newspapers, television or radio stations, or websites were specified.

exposure to each outlet in question on a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 stands for never reading or watching a specific newspaper or newscast and 7 stands for reading or watching it every day of the week.⁵ Furthermore, research on media perceptions finds a strong positive relationship with trust in, cynicism towards or satisfaction with, democracy and government (Lee, 2005, 2010; Tsftati and Cohen, 2005). We again expect a similar relationship to perceived media bias and therefore also included a variable measuring satisfaction with democracy (1–4, “not at all satisfied” to “very satisfied”, mean = 2.3, *SD* = 0.8).

In summary, including this large number of control variables ensures a precise and conservative estimate of the actual relationship between political preferences and general perceived media bias, perceived outlet bias as well as perceived beneficiaries of their bias.

8 Results

Among the survey respondents, general perceived media bias is quite high and similar to findings from the Reuters Digital Report (2016), as can be expected for a country with relatively high political parallelism (Lelkes, 2016). In fact, close to 75 % of all respondents agree, at least a little, with the statement that “Austrian media are biased” (mean = 2.8, *SD* = 0.9). Perceived bias of single outlets is less pronounced with strong variation between news outlets. With only 23.2 % (*Die Presse*) and 25.3 % (*Der Standard*) of respondents, quality newspapers are perceived as being the least biased, followed by the public broadcasting television programs *Zeit im Bild 1* (34.1 %) and *Zeit im Bild 2* (32.9 %). Most respondents perceived bias within the tabloid newspapers *Heute* (37.3 %), *Österreich* (42.2 %) and *Neue Kronen Zeitung* (59.6 %). Finally, the governing SPÖ is perceived to be most strongly favored in the public broadcasting program *Zeit im Bild 2*, whereas the ÖVP is most strongly associated with the conservative broadsheet *Die Presse*. On the level of perceived outlet-party biases, the FPÖ’s most favorable slant is, for example, seen in the tabloid *Neue Kronen Zeitung* and the Greens’ in the progressive broadsheet *Der Standard*. More generally, only few respondents perceive favorable coverage for the smallest parties NEOS and TS.

⁵ Descriptive statistics for each outlet: *Der Standard*, mean = 1.9, *SD* = 2.6; *Die Presse*, mean = 0.8, *SD* = 1.8; *Kronen Zeitung*, mean = 1.9, *SD* = 2.6; *Österreich*, mean = 1.1, *SD* = 2.0; *Heute*, mean = 1.2, *SD* = 2.0; *Zeit im Bild 1*, mean = 2.9, *SD* = 2.6; *Zeit im Bild 2*, mean = 2.1, *SD* = 2.3).

8.1 Perceived media bias in general

The first layer of perceived media bias concerns how respondents perceive the media as a whole. In a first regression, the effects of controls are estimated (Model 1). In a second step, ideological left-right self-placement and its squared term were added (Model 2). In a third model, preferences for each party are investigated (Model 3, all in Table 1).

The effects of confounders will be interpreted based on the full model (Model 3). In contrast to previous studies such as Eveland and Shah (2003) and Lee (2005), we find that general perceived media bias is greater for older and more educated respondents ($p < 0.001$). We cannot find evidence that general perceived media bias is gender-dependent. We can confirm, however, that respondents with increased political interest are more likely to perceive media as

Table 1: OLS for the effects of political preferences on general perceived media bias.

| Dependent variable: General perceived media bias (1–4) | M 1 Baseline | M 2 Add ideology | M 3 Add party preferences |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| | β | | |
| Age (16–85) | .151*** | .148*** | .133*** |
| Gender (0/1, 1 = female) | -.033 | -.019 | -.013 |
| Education (1–4) | .043 ⁺ | .054* | .088*** |
| Political interest (1–4) | .108*** | .120*** | .104*** |
| Print news use (1–5) | .002 | .005 | .014 |
| TV news use (1–5) | -.046 | -.052 ⁺ | -.058* |
| Radio news use (1–5) | .009 | .004 | .006 |
| Online news use (1–5) | .051 ⁺ | .060* | .058* |
| Social media use (0/1) | -.011 | -.006 | .004 |
| Democratic satisfaction (1–4) | -.304*** | -.265*** | -.179*** |
| Left/right scale (0–10) | | .132 ⁺ | .040 |
| Left/right scale ² | | .001 | -.024 |
| PTV SPÖ (0–10) | | | -.089** |
| PTV ÖVP (0–10) | | | -.037 |
| PTV FPÖ (0–10) | | | .093** |
| PTV Grüne (0–10) | | | -.113*** |
| PTV TS (0–10) | | | .010 |
| PTV NEOS (0–10) | | | -.005 |
| R ² | .14 | .15 | .18 |

Note: $N = 1,679$; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $^+p < .1$. An F-Test was computed showing that the increase in model fit between Model 2 and Model 3 was in fact statistically significant ($p < .001$).

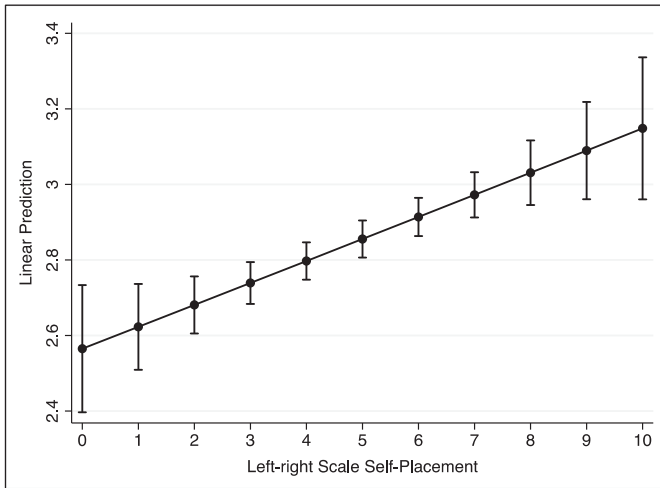


Figure 2: Predicted level of general perceived media bias depending on left-right scale selfplacement.

Note: Predicted levels are computed based on Model 2 in Table 1.

being biased ($p < 0.001$) (e.g., Lee, 2005, p. 51; see Eveland and Shah, 2003, p. 111 for a similar effect concerning political involvement). The use of traditional print or radio media for political information as well as social media use do not relate to an increased generalized perception of media bias. The use of television news (where public broadcasters still dominate the market) are negatively associated with perceived media bias ($p = 0.035$), while there is a positive effect for online media ($p = 0.027$). Finally, we do find the theorized strong negative relationship ($p < 0.001$) between democratic satisfaction and general perceived media bias (e.g., Lee, 2005, pp. 51–52). Most effects remain robust throughout the different models.

In Model 2, results provide evidence that voters who place themselves on the right of the ideological spectrum perceive the media to be generally more biased than their liberal or moderate counterparts (H1b).⁶ For each one-point move to the right on the ideological scale, respondents' general perceived media bias ($SD = 0.89$) increases by 0.06 points (see Figure 2). Ideological extremism (H1a), however, does not seem to be a relevant predictor.

While effects of ideology now disappear, it becomes apparent that there is a strong relationship between the general perception of media bias and

⁶ If only the left-right scale without the squared term is added to the regression, the effect of the left-right self-placement is at $\beta = 0.133$ with $p < 0.001$.

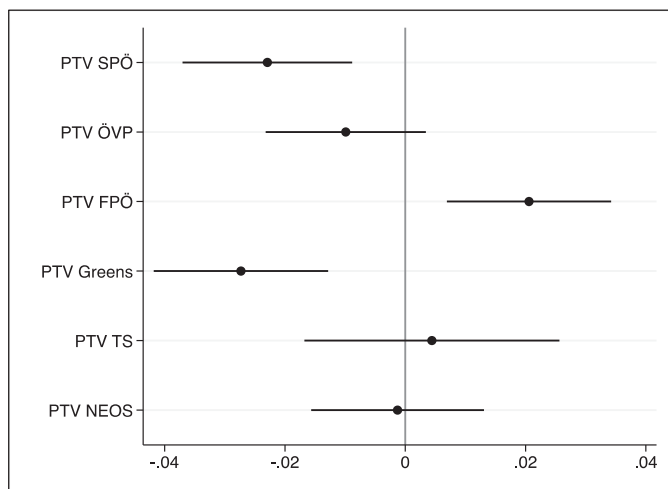


Figure 3: Effects of party preferences on general perceived media bias.

Note: Effects are computed based on Model 3 in Table 1.

preferences towards (i.e., the propensity to vote for) the SPÖ, the Greens or the FPÖ. Respondents who have a high propensity to vote for the Social-Democrats (SPÖ) or the Greens – both left of the center but not extreme left parties – are less likely to perceive Austrian media as biased ($\beta = -0.089$, $p = 0.001$ and $\beta = -0.113$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). In contrast, respondents who lean towards the radical-right FPÖ are likely to perceive Austrian media generally as more biased ($\beta = 0.093$, $p = 0.003$). Preferences towards other parties show no statistically significant effects (see Figure 3). In this regard, the relationship between party preferences and general media bias does seem to be driven by the extreme right of the political party system rather than ideological extremism of the both sides, supporting H1b.

8.2 Perceived media outlet bias

Descriptive analyses already showed that there are strong differences between single outlets when it comes to perceived bias. Similarly, effects of control variables (see Table 2) also somewhat differ from the earlier models. The impact of age only predicts perceptions of the public broadcaster. However, men, when asked about concrete outlets, have a clear tendency to perceive individual outlets to be more biased than women do (also see Eveland and Shah, 2003; Lee, 2005). Education and political interest have similar positive effects on perceived

Table 2: Logistic regression for the effects of political preferences on perceived media outlet bias.

| Dependent variable: Perceived outlet bias | Quality newspapers | | Tabloid newspapers | | | Public broadcaster (TV) | | |
|--|--------------------|------------|--------------------|------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|--|
| | M 1 | M 2 | M 3 | M 4 | M 5 | M 6 | M 7 | |
| | Der Standard | Die Presse | Kronen Zeitung | Österreich | Heute | ZIB 1 | ZIB 2 | |
| Fully Standardized Coefficients (bStdXY) | | | | | | | | |
| Age (16–85) | .043 | .047 | .054 | –.007 | –.043 | .067* | .066* | |
| Gender (0/1, 1 = female) | –.067* | –.086* | –.089** | –.079** | –.127*** | –.084** | –.066* | |
| Education (1–4) | .188*** | .164*** | .115*** | .130*** | .102** | .027 | .046 | |
| Political interest (1–4) | .186*** | .159*** | .182*** | .178*** | .178*** | .185*** | .206*** | |
| Outlet use (1–7) | .057* | .017 | –.071* | .074** | .106*** | .041 | .059* | |
| Social media use (0/1) | .068* | .040 | .010 | .050* | .042 | .022 | .046 | |
| Democratic satisfaction (1–4) | –.145*** | –.101** | –.022 | –.059* | –.062+ | –.125*** | –.125*** | |
| Left/right scale (0–10) | –.126 | –.314** | –.043 | –.264* | –.184* | .081 | .111 | |
| Left/right scale ² | .145 | .286** | .029 | .344** | .191+ | –.045 | –.096 | |
| PTV SPÖ (0–10) | –.003 | –.022 | –.068+ | –.062+ | –.104** | –.051 | –.063+ | |
| PTV ÖVP (0–10) | .008 | –.080* | –.010 | –.018 | –.030 | –.016 | –.0001 | |
| PTV FPÖ (0–10) | .075+ | –.016 | –.100* | –.048 | –.124** | .197*** | .199*** | |
| PTV Grüne (0–10) | –.167*** | –.077+ | –.022 | .038 | –.019 | –.174*** | –.191*** | |
| PTV TS (0–10) | .046 | .002 | –.073* | –.091*** | –.057+ | .038 | .028 | |
| PTV NEOS (0–10) | –.037 | –.100** | .061+ | .051 | .039 | .008 | .013 | |
| Nagelkerke's R ² | .17 | .11 | .11 | .11 | .12 | .28 | .28 | |
| N of observations | 1,597 | 1,597 | 1,596 | 1,596 | 1,597 | 1,586 | 1,595 | |

Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .1$. Regression models showing odds ratios are in Appendix, Table 3.

bias. In the case of *Der Standard* ($p = .058$), *Österreich* ($p = .009$), *Heute* ($p < .001$) and *Zeit im Bild 2* ($p = .047$), exposure to these outlets tends to somewhat increase the probability of perceiving them as biased. Particularly the use of alternative media sources such as social media plays an important role in the perception that the progressive broadsheet *Der Standard* is more biased ($p = .034$). Finally, while democratic satisfaction is a strong predictor for bias perceptions of quality media coverage (broadsheets and public broadcasts), it is less so, if not at all, for tabloids. This thus suggests a normatively questionable relationship between tabloid perceptions and democratic satisfaction; perceiving tabloids as unbiased goes hand in hand with one's dissatisfaction with democracy. This relates broadly to findings by Hopmann et al. (2015, p. 789), who reported that reading tabloids would decrease respondents' trust in all other types of media outlets.

Turning to political preferences, the rather clear relationship on the level of general media bias appears to be more complicated on the level of single outlets. Respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale reveals evidence for the ideological extremism argument concerning *Die Presse* (although a little skewed to the ideological left), *Österreich* (a little skewed towards the ideological right) and *Heute*. In these cases, extremists are more likely to perceive these media outlets as biased than would moderates. Otherwise, ideology per se does not seem to be helpful in predicting perceived outlet bias, when also controlling for party preferences (see Appendix, Figure 7).⁷

Party preferences do clearly drive perceived outlet biases (see Table 2). However, effects differ between single media outlets and mirror expected ideological leanings of the outlets based on recent content analyses (see, e.g., Eberl et al., 2015). The perceived bias of the progressive broadsheet *Der Standard* tends to increase with preferences towards the right-wing FPÖ (odds ratio = 1.038, $p = .074$) and decreases with preferences towards the Greens (p odds ratio = 0.914, $< .001$). Even stronger effects can be found for the public broadcasting programs ZiB1 and ZiB2, often accused of leftist bias by the FPÖ (Die Presse, 2016). Conversely, perceived bias for the libertarian-bourgeois broadsheet *Die Presse* significantly decreases with respondents' preferences towards the People's Party (odds ratio = 0.954, $p = 0.028$), Liberals (odds ratio = 0.941,

⁷ When excluding party preferences from the model, right-leaning voters are more likely to perceive the progressive quality newspaper *Der Standard* as well as the public broadcaster programs ZiB 1 and ZiB 2 to be more biased. For the conservative quality newspaper *Die Presse* and the tabloids *Österreich* and *Heute* both voters from the extreme left and extreme right are more likely to perceive them as biased. There is, however, no statistically significant relationship between ideological preferences and bias perceptions for the largest tabloid *Neue Kronen Zeitung* (see Appendix Figure 6).

$p = .009$) and somewhat even the Greens (odds ratio = 0.961, $p = .080$). Respondents preferring rather working-class oriented parties such as the Social-Democrats (SPÖ), FPÖ or Team Stronach (TS) perceive the Austrian tabloids *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich* and *Heute* as less biased. Unsurprisingly these tabloids are regularly accused of adjusting their coverage in favor of, or having organizational ties to, the SPÖ and FPÖ (Maan and Schmid, 2016; Plasser and Seeber, 2010).

8.3 Perceived outlet-party bias

This final section takes a closer look at the perceived beneficiaries of each outlet’s bias. The intention now is to find out to what point preferences for a party influence the probability of naming that party as being favored by a media outlet. Results show that for nearly every outlet, respondents will have a higher probability of perceiving a party they dislike as being favored than a party they like (not significant for *Der Standard*, $p = .015$ for *Zeit im Bild 2*, $p = .003$ for *Die Presse*, and $p < .001$ for *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich*, *Heute*

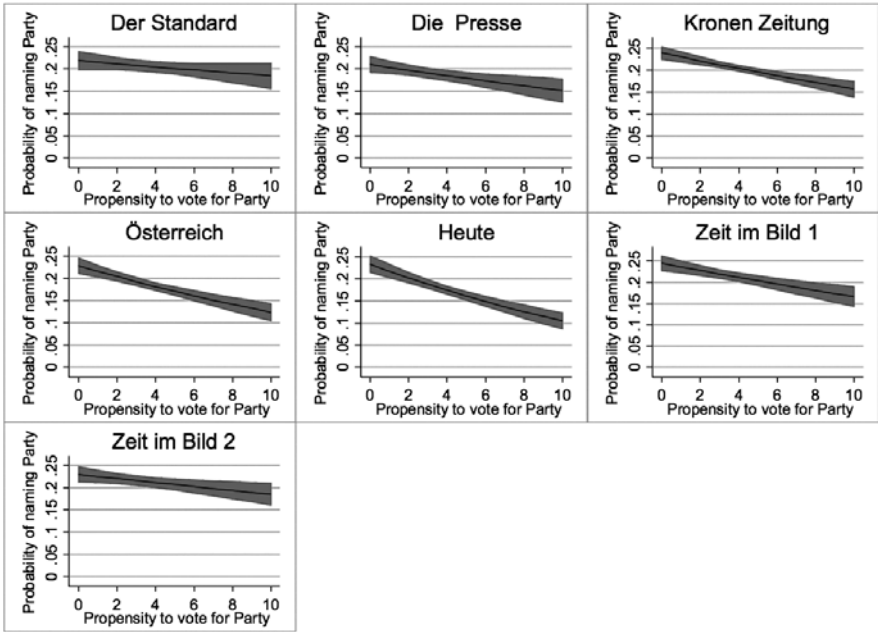


Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of naming a party to be perceived as favored in a media outlet depending on voters’ general preferences towards that party.
Note: Effects are computed based on models in Appendix, Table 4.

as well as *Zeit im Bild 1*). Overall, effects seem to be less pronounced for quality newspapers and public broadcasters (see Figure 4 and Appendix, Table 4). Findings suggest that perceived bias of quality media may be more defined or more salient to respondents – but not necessarily stronger – than that of tabloid media. This leads to respondents perceiving not only hostile but also congenial bias in most quality media outlets.

Analyses were run again separately for readers and non-readers (see Figure 5). This is an attempt to investigate to what extent aforementioned effects are moderated by selective media exposure, where audiences may try to reduce cognitive dissonance by consuming mainly outlets or information consonant with their own political views (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Wagner, forthcoming), thus perceiving those outlets they do not use to be most hostile. The most surprising findings concern *Die Presse*, where there is a positive relationship between party preferences and the probability of naming a party as being favored for readers, but a negative one for non-readers, and *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, where party preferences do not relate to perceived outlet-party bias for

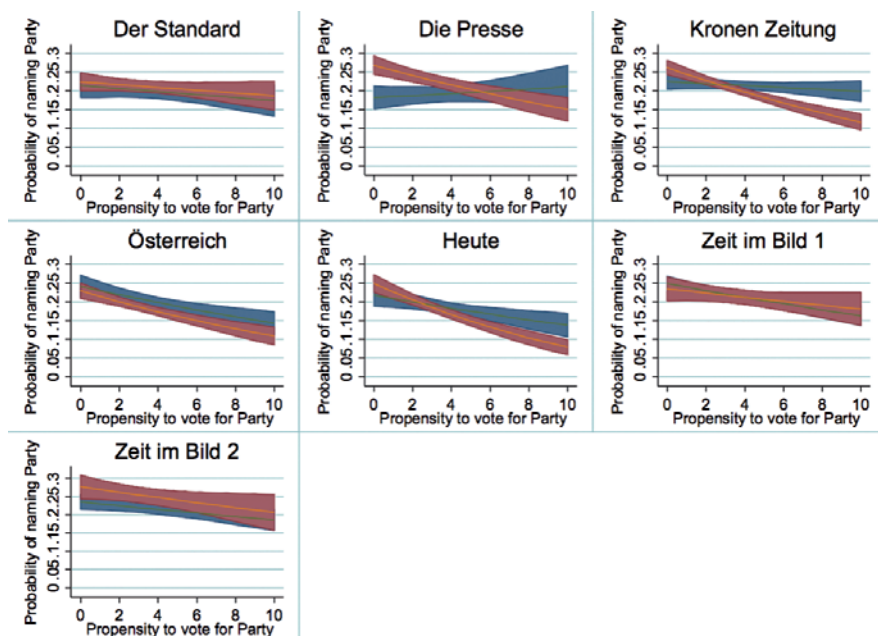


Figure 5: Predicted probabilities of naming a party to be perceived as favored in a media outlet depending on voters' general preferences towards that party and outlet use.

Note: Blue = readers, red = non-readers. Effects are computed based on models in Appendix, Tables 5–6.

readers. Overall, however, results do not differ strongly between readers and non-readers.

Summing up, results show strong evidence that the probability of naming a party to be favored in a media outlet increases with respondents' dislike of that party (H3) and that these effects are somewhat stronger for tabloid newspapers. Furthermore, and with only a few exceptions, there is also evidence that this process is not based on a mechanism of selective exposure, since differences between readers and non-readers are not so pronounced. This is an additional indication of perceived outlet-party bias being more strongly related to individual's political perceptions and pre-existing conceptions of these media outlets associated with these political perceptions, rather than to actual cues from news content.

9 Conclusion

This study is the first to analyze effects of political preferences on media perceptions based on three different conceptual levels of perceived media bias, aiming to revisit core assumptions about their relationship with political preferences. It is also the first to give such an overview in the context of a multi-party system with above-average political parallelism and an increasingly right-leaning electorate with decreasing trust in media.

In sum, three different mechanisms can be witnessed in the three layers of perceived media bias. First, on the level of general perceived media bias, results show that particularly radical right voters tend to perceive the media to be biased (H1b). There is no indication of general political extremism influencing media bias perceptions since radical left voters tend to perceive the media to be much less biased than any other voters. Second, while perceived media bias is strongly related to right-wing ideology and party preferences, right-leaners seem to be less skeptical of tabloids than other voters would be. Furthermore, left-leaners have much more positive perceptions of quality or elite media. Overall, the relationship between political preferences and media outlets seems to reflect a partisanship of audiences, which one would generally expect based on genre and/or outlets' expected political leaning (H2). Third, although differences in the perceptions of different media outlets exist, outlet-party bias is strongly related to out-group derogation and particularly so for tabloids, as parties that respondents prefer are less likely to be perceived as favored in news coverage of these outlets (H3). This effect is less pronounced for quality media, which may imply that these outlets have a more distinct bias. Perceptions of who is favored in media coverage seem largely independent of actual

media content and appear instead to be based on either in-group cues (e.g., from party communication) or pre-existing expectations about each outlet (e.g., historic ties). When explaining media bias perceptions, it is thus important to take into account or at least to be aware of these different layers and of how strongly they may influence findings.

Although research on the hostile media phenomenon suggests that media content is subordinate to political preferences, the interplay between media content and media perceptions in general should be investigated once more, particularly with the rise of fake news in social media (e.g., Marchi, 2012). Future studies dealing with this relationship should invest in examining the causal mechanism in more detail and with more diverse measures for each layer of perceived media bias. In a multi-party setting in particular it may be fruitful not only to ask about parties being favored, but to ask about parties being disadvantaged in coverage as well. Furthermore, while it makes sense to argue that political preferences affect our perceptions of media, objective bias (coverage) also affects political preferences and media perceptions (see “media malaise theory”, e.g., Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, and Bennet, 1999; Robinson, 1976) and probably does so on different conceptual levels.

The theoretical claims concerning the relationship between political preferences and perceived media bias are not specific to the Austrian case. Although the political imbalance of perceived media bias witnessed in this study is generally new for multi-party systems, it has to be seen as a by-product of the rise of extreme-right and populist-right wing movements in Western democracies. Hence, we would expect similar patterns to hold at least in countries with comparable media and party systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Negative perceptions of mainstream media, the decrease in media trust as well as any increase in perceived bias are thus strongly driven by a very specific group of citizens and possible cues – such as a skepticism towards the “Lügenpresse” – they receive from right-wing parties and sympathizing alternative news sources (Reinemann and Fawzi, 2016).

On the one hand, finding that differences between media genres do play an additional role in understanding the nature of perceived media bias (see also Hopmann et al., 2015) underlines that European tabloids may have a responsibility as they are still able to reach these voters. Tabloids’ contribution to public discourse about media bias, or lack thereof, should be studied in more detail. On the other hand, since perceptions between readers and non-readers do not differ strongly, political preferences seem to be the main driving force, journalists have a difficult task in terms of regaining the trust of audiences that would rather see their content censored than balanced. In order to counteract the respective voters’ discontentment with media coverage, respon-

sibility also lies within the party system to increase citizens' trust or at least not to further citizens' distrust in the media;⁸ particularly so since trust in free and independent media can be seen as a cornerstone for a working democracy (Tsfati and Cohen, 2005). Particularly academia, politicians as well as the general public should call public officials out on spreading said generalized allegations about media slant. Finally, journalists – both from broadsheets as well as from tabloids – should try to be more transparent about their journalistic practices and decisions to offer skeptics the possibility to reassess their attitudes (see Wegner, 2016).

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⁸ In Austria, particularly the FPÖ has been found to spread false and fake news via social media as well as to act upon that information in the form parliamentary inquiries (Schmid, 2016). In turn, such behavior of a leading political party can increase voters' insecurity about what information to trust and the impartiality of mainstream media.

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Appendix

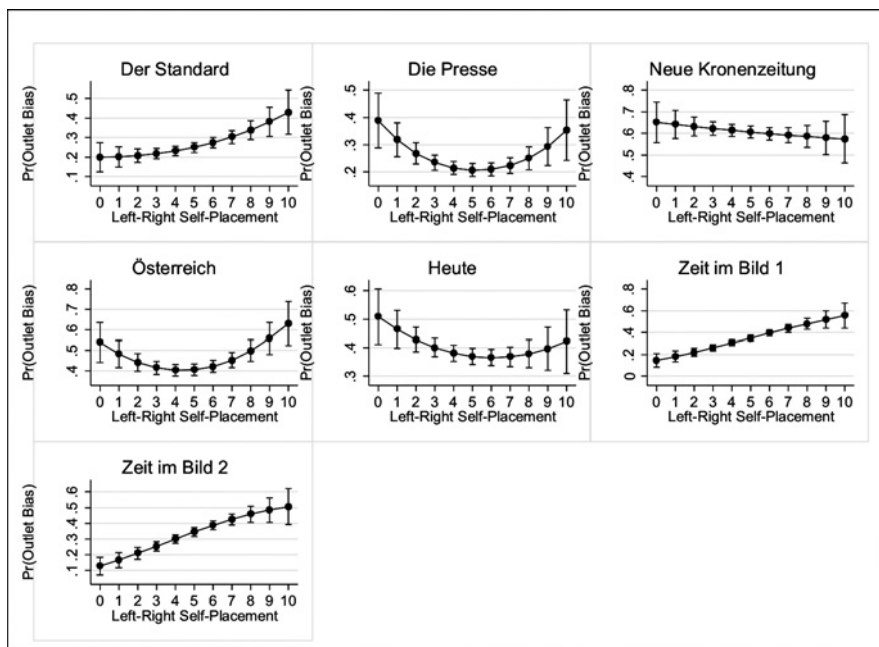


Figure 6: Marginal effects of ideological self-placement on perceived media outlet bias – without party preferences.

Note: Effects are computed based on models in Table 2 but without party preferences (i.e., propensity to vote).

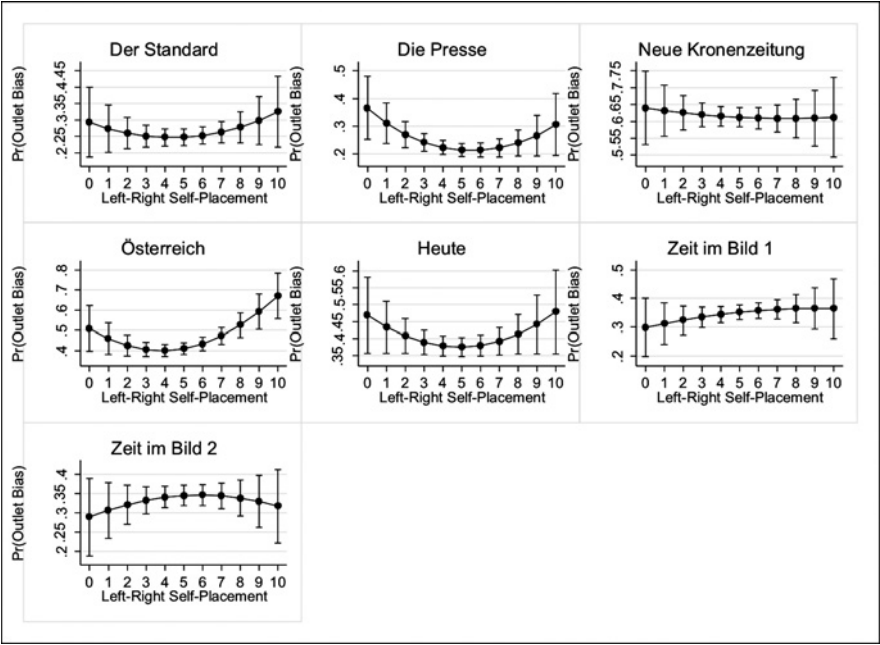


Figure 7: Marginal effects of ideological self-placement on perceived media outlet bias.
Note: Effects are computed based on models in Table 2.

Table 3: Logistic regression for the effects of political preferences on perceived media outlet bias.

| Dependent variable: Perceived outlet bias (0/1) | Quality newspapers | | | Tabloid newspapers | | | Public broadcaster (TV) | | |
|--|--------------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------|----------|-------------------------|----------|--|
| | M 1 | M 2 | M 3 | M 4 | M 5 | M 6 | M 7 | | |
| | Der Standard | Die Presse | Kronen Zeitung | Österreich | Heute | ZIB 1 | ZIB 2 | | |
| Odds ratio | | | | | | | | | |
| Age (16–85) | 1.005 | 1.006 | 1.007 | .999 | .995 | 1.009* | 1.009* | 1.009* | |
| Gender (0/1, 1 = female) | .764* | .716* | .712** | .737** | .614*** | .698** | .754* | .754* | |
| Education (1–4) | 1.518*** | 1.424*** | 1.277*** | 1.320*** | 1.242** | 1.066 | 1.116 | 1.116 | |
| Political interest (1–4) | 1.592*** | 1.470*** | 1.546*** | 1.534*** | 1.538*** | 1.636*** | 1.739*** | 1.739*** | |
| Outlet use (1–7) | 1.062* | 1.019 | .949* | 1.075** | 1.107*** | 1.034 | 1.055* | 1.055* | |
| Social media use (0/1) | 1.350* | 1.184 | 1.042 | 1.238* | 1.196 | 1.108 | 1.243 | 1.243 | |
| Democratic satisfaction (1–4) | .693*** | .781** | .949 | .866+ | .860+ | .714*** | .713*** | .713*** | |
| Left/right scale (0–10) | .885 | .296** | .961 | .782* | .842+ | 1.086 | 1.121 | 1.121 | |
| Left/right scale ² | 1.014 | 1.027** | 1.003 | 1.032** | 1.018+ | .995 | .990 | .990 | |
| PTV SPÖ (0–10) | .998 | .988 | .963+ | .966+ | .943** | .969 | .962+ | .962+ | |
| PTV ÖVP (0–10) | 1.005 | .954* | .994 | .990 | .983 | .990 | .999 | .999 | |
| PTV FPÖ (0–10) | 1.038+ | .992 | .954* | .977 | .943** | 1.109*** | 1.110*** | 1.110*** | |
| PTV Grüne (0–10) | .914*** | .961+ | .989 | 1.020 | 1.010 | .904*** | .895*** | .895*** | |
| PTV TS (0–10) | 1.047 | 1.001 | .932* | .916*** | .946+ | 1.041 | 1.030 | 1.030 | |
| PTV NEOS (0–10) | .977 | .941** | 1.037+ | 1.031 | 1.024 | 1.005 | 1.008 | 1.008 | |
| Nagelkerke's R ² | .17 | .11 | .11 | .11 | .12 | .28 | .28 | .28 | |
| N of observations | 1,597 | 1,597 | 1,596 | 1,596 | 1,597 | 1,586 | 1,595 | 1,595 | |

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

Table 4: Logistic regression for the effects of party preferences on the probability of naming a party to be perceived as favored in a media outlet (All respondents).

| Dependent variable: Perceived party favoritism (0/1) | M 1 Der Standard | M 2 Die Presse | M 3 Kronen Zeitung | M 4 Öster-reich | M 5 Heute | M 6 ZIB 1 | M 7 ZIB 2 |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Odds ratio | | | | | | |
| PTV | 0.971 | 0.935** | 0.923*** | 0.903*** | 0.875*** | 0.914*** | 0.951* |
| Controls included | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Nagelkerke's R^2 | 0.39 | 0.50 | 0.46 | 0.42 | 0.43 | 0.57 | 0.57 |
| N of observations | 2,497 | 2,275 | 5,909 | 4,215 | 3,766 | 3,332 | 3,254 |
| N of cluster | 417 | 380 | 986 | 704 | 628 | 556 | 543 |

Note: Centered predicted values associated with each party for voter-specific control variables. Standard errors clustered by respondents. ptv = propensity to vote for the party. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 5: Logistic regression for the effects of party preferences on the probability of naming a party to be perceived as favored in a media outlet (Readers only).

| Dependent variable: Perceived party favoritism (0/1) | M 1 Der Standard | M 2 Die Presse | M 3 Kronen Zeitung | M 4 Öster-reich | M 5 Heute | M 6 ZIB 1 | M 7 ZIB 2 |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Odds ratio | | | | | | |
| PTV | 0.966 | 1.031 | 0.977 | 0.913** | 0.921** | 0.912*** | 0.947* |
| Controls included | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Nagelkerke's R^2 | 0.36 | 0.45 | 0.44 | 0.40 | 0.41 | 0.54 | 0.56 |
| N of observations | 964 | 744 | 3,044 | 1,502 | 1,458 | 2,634 | 2,154 |
| N of cluster | 161 | 124 | 508 | 251 | 243 | 439 | 359 |

Note: Centered predicted values associated with each party for voter-specific control variables. Standard errors clustered by respondents. ptv = propensity to vote for the party. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 6: Logistic regression for the effects of party preferences on the probability of naming a party to be perceived as favored in a media outlet (Non-readers only).

| Dependent variable: Perceived party favoritism (0/1) | M 1 Der Standard | M 2 Die Presse | M 3 Kronen Zeitung | M 4 Öster-reich | M 5 Heute | M 6 ZIB 1 | M 7 ZIB 2 |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Odds ratio | | | | | | |
| PTV | 0.970 | 0.887*** | 0.864*** | 0.884*** | 0.832*** | 0.934 | 0.934* |
| Controls included | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Nagelkerke's R^2 | 0.41 | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.44 | 0.46 | 0.62 | 0.56 |
| N of observations | 1,683 | 1,403 | 3,183 | 2,911 | 2,452 | 932 | 1,082 |
| N of cluster | 281 | 281 | 531 | 486 | 409 | 156 | 217 |

Note: Centered predicted values associated with each party for voter-specific control variables. Standard errors clustered by respondents. ptv = propensity to vote for the party.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.