

Does Public Support for UKIP Drive Media Coverage or Does Media Coverage Drive Support for UKIP?

Justin Murphy
University of Southampton

Abstract

Previous research suggests media attention may cause support for populist right-wing parties, but this finding is debated and extant evidence remains limited to proportional representation systems in which such an effect would be most likely. At the same time, in the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post system, an ongoing political and regulatory debate revolves around whether the media give disproportionate coverage to the populist right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP). Thus, we use a mixed-methods approach to investigate the causal dynamics of UKIP support and media coverage as an especially valuable case. Vector autoregression (VAR) using monthly, aggregate time-series data from 2004 to September 2015 provides additional evidence, from a new and less-likely institutional environment, consistent with the model that media drive party support, but not vice-versa. Additionally, qualitative investigation of the dynamics suggests that in at least two key periods of stagnating or declining support for UKIP, media coverage increased and was followed by increases in public support. Overall the findings show that media coverage can and does appear to drive public support in a substantively important fashion irreducible to previous levels of public support.

Introduction

If the visibility of a political party in the media shapes the public support it receives, then the degree to which the media gives attention to different political parties can have significant implications for democracy. In the United Kingdom, critics allege that the media pays disproportionate attention to the populist, right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP) but media elites claim that media coverage of UKIP is

driven by increasing public support for the party. Descriptively, media attention to UKIP is greater than that given to other, similarly small parties on the right as well as the left (Goodwin and Ford, 2013; Stevenson, 2014; Soussi, 2014), but UK media regulator Ofcom as well as the BBC have publicly defended the attention paid to UKIP on grounds of public support for the party (Sweeney, 2015; Wintour, 2015). Implied in this elite reasoning is a causal model, namely that public support drives media coverage rather than vice-versa.

Yet previous research from multiparty, proportional representation systems suggests that media coverage drives public support

We present the first statistical time-series analysis testing the degree to which media coverage of UKIP is driven by public support for UKIP and/or vice versa. In particular, I gather monthly time-series of public support for UKIP from Ipsos MORI's voting intention polls and a monthly count of UKIP mentions in all UK National Newspapers (drawn from the database Nexis). I begin with a series of econometric analyses to investigate whether media coverage drives support, support drives media coverage, or both. First, vector-autoregression (VAR) is used as a straightforward and relatively atheoretical way to document the stylized facts of the causal dynamics. Then, separate error-correction models are estimated as an alternative approach to the question making different assumptions. Finally, I provide a brief qualitative examination of the time-series. Both econometric techniques and the qualitative evidence converge on the conclusion that the relationship between public support and media coverage of UKIP is one of positive feedback: while public support is positively correlated with future levels of media coverage, media coverage is also independently correlated with future increases in public support. Qualitative exploration of these dynamics identify at least two key time periods in which support for UKIP was de-

creasing but media coverage increased and may have caused support for UKIP to increase: a surge in media coverage in the second half of 2012, not triggered by any public support, was followed by a surge of support which came in the first half of 2013. Then, despite *decreasing* support throughout 2013, media coverage increases briefly before surging in the second half of 2013 until the middle of 2014, apparently helping to maintain current levels of support.

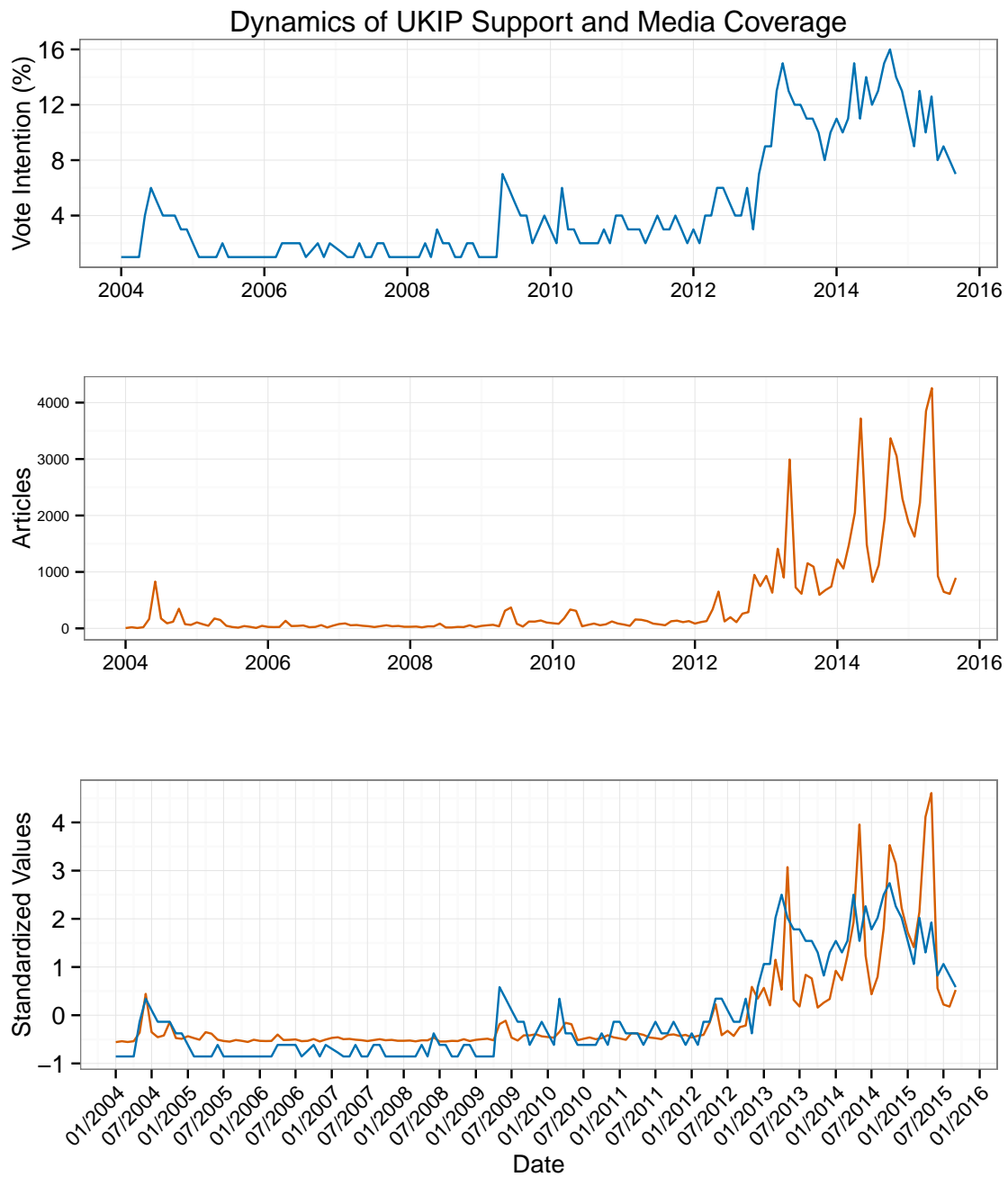


Figure 1: Dynamics of UKIP Support and Media Coverage

Background and Literature Review

The crucial and controversial question—and the motivation for this article—is whether the quantity of UKIP’s media coverage represents a form of media bias with negative implications for democracy, or if the media’s fascination with UKIP is merely a reasonable or even healthy response to a newly rising political party. If disproportionate media coverage is not simply responsive to public opinion but effectively driving public opinion and shaping outcomes such as elections, as some argue (Soussi, 2014), then clearly the media’s disproportionate coverage of UKIP is at best normatively problematic and at worst complicit in the legitimation and empowerment of what is alleged to be UKIP’s coded racism and proto-fascism (Webb, 2014; Syal, 2015).

While a great deal of research documents various aspects of the relationship between media and right-wing populist parties, little is known specifically about the effects of the quantity of party-specific media coverage on aggregate party support from a dynamic perspective. The closest previous research comes to this particular question is work by (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007, 2009), who find that greater media coverage of immigration issues is positively associated with support for anti-immigration parties. Other research has studied the dynamics of individual-level exposure to media coverage and perceptions of right-wing politicians (Bos et al., 2011). Still, currently extant research tells us surprisingly little about the causal dynamics of public support and the quantity of media coverage of right-wing populist parties. In part, this may be because the application of time-series techniques to aggregate media data remains relatively under-explored (Vliegenthart, 2014a).

H1: Coverage drives support Most of the literature concerning the visibility-support nexus investigates the impact of media coverage on public opinion and electoral sup-

port. To our knowledge, this has only been studied in multi-party proportional systems such as Belgium (WALGRAVE and SWERT, 2004), the Netherlands and Germany (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2007; Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2010; Vliegenthart et al., 2012). In all of these cases, however, the authors found a positive effect of media coverage on the intention to vote for right-wing and anti-immigration parties although some have called these findings into question on the basis of methodological concerns (Pauwels, 2010).

Other scholars have addressed the question indirectly. In his study on the diffusion of the populist message in the media, (Rooduijn, 2014) hypothesises that the electoral success of populist parties affects the degree and acceptability of populism in the media. Other authors in the literature explore the theoretical connection of media coverage and the rise of populist and right-wing parties, but offer little or no empirical evidence for the claim (Art, 2007; Mudde, 2013). Nevertheless, there is a considerable body of literature which posits particular mechanisms which may offer a causal explanation for how the quantity of media coverage can increase support for a political party. The primary explanation revolves around issue saliency and the aligning of a party or a party leader with those salient issues (Brug et al., 2006; Cushion et al., 2015; Dennison and Goodwin, 2015). In the case of UKIP, the party was strongly aligned with the issue of immigration and the European Union, and the increasing prominence of these issues in the media drove both coverage and support for the party. (WALGRAVE and SWERT, 2004) offer a similar analysis of the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, concluding that the media are at least part responsible for the growth of the right-wing party. Although that study does conclude in support of this relationship, they do not commit themselves to arguing a causal relationship.

H1: Increases in media coverage lead to increased public support, controlling for

previous levels of public support.

H2: Support drives coverage Alternatively, the causal arrow could run the other way, where the support that a party receives increases the amount of media coverage. As (Vliegthart and Boomgaarden, 2010) consider, this could be related to the power and position of political figures, referencing studies from both America (Sellers and Schaffner, 2007) and Switzerland (Tresch, 2009) which highlight how the standing of a political actor influences media attention. Another possibility is that media coverage depends on the dynamics of the party itself (Pauwels, 2010): in our case, the relative acceptability of UKIP’s agenda as opposed to other British populist parties such as the British National Party may have contributed to the rise in coverage, as well as the popularity and charisma of Nigel Farage. Finally, political polling and the reporting of political polls is ubiquitous in British media, including tabloid papers running polls of their own readers. It could be the case that increasing media coverage is simply reflective of their standing in polls, or that there is a positive feedback mechanism operating between media coverage and polling. We therefore test this possibility, hypothesising that

H2: Increases in public support for UKIP lead to increased media coverage, controlling for previous levels of media coverage

Data, Method, and Research Strategy

To measure public support for UKIP, I gathered monthly aggregate polling data on vote intentions from Ipsos MORI (Ipsos-MORI, n.d.). Specifically, I constructed a variable from the percentage reporting an intention to vote for UKIP according to the Ipsos MORI poll closest to the middle of each month. For most months, this was

straightforward because the Ipsos MORI poll is approximately monthly. For months with multiple polls, I used the poll closest to the middle of the month. For the very few months with no poll or a poll at the border between the previous or following month, the value was counted as missing and then all missing values were linearly interpolated. To measure media coverage of UKIP, I gathered monthly counts of all UK national newspaper reports mentioning either “UKIP” or “UK Independence Party” from the database Nexis (Anon., n.d.).¹

Econometric techniques are used to test for, and distinguish the ordering of, potential causal dynamics between media coverage and public support for UKIP. A brief qualitative historical analysis of these dynamics will be used to better understand a potential causal process. In particular, the substantive nature of the puzzle at hand requires the identification of a causal narrative. Even with econometric evidence suggesting an independent causal effect from either one to the other, it would not be clear whether the historical unfolding of these causal dynamics implies a problem for democracy. We are not only interested in whether media coverage amplifies exogenous increases in support—this would be an important but not necessarily problematic finding from a democratic perspective—but whether increases in media coverage have generated support for UKIP despite low, stagnant, or decreasing levels of support.

Analysis

VAR

Because both variables are non-stationary, vector autoregression is estimated with first differences of each variable. Optimal lag length is determined by the Aikeke

¹Duplicate articles defined by Nexis’s definition of high similarity were excluded.

Information Criterion to be to be VAR(3). The model includes a constant and a trend term. Diagnostics suggest that using the log of each variable before differencing reduces heteroskedasticity and serial correlation of errors. Because VAR models have many parameters to begin with, monthly indicators controlling for seasonality absorb crucial degrees of freedom and so are excluded in the initial models but added in subsequent models. The models displayed here all pass the standard ARCH-LM and Portmanteau tests for non-constant error variance and serial correlation of errors, respectively. Finally, diagnostics show no evidence of significant temporal instability (see Supplementary Information).

Surprisingly, initial VAR results show little evidence that changes in public support predict media coverage, but significant evidence that media coverage drives public support. As the numerical results and the Impulse Response plots show, there is no statistically discernable correlation between past changes in public support and changes in media coverage, whereas past changes in media coverage have a statistically significant correlation with changes in public support. Granger causality tests support this interpretation, with only the latter relationship nearing conventional cutoffs of statistical significance ($p < .08$).

After including monthly indicators, however, the results reverse: while the coefficients reflecting the correlation between past changes in media coverage and public support do not change noticeably, they lose statistical significance, whereas the coefficients for the other model become significant and pass the test for Granger causality. Because the coefficients reflecting the correlation between past changes in media coverage and public support remain signed as predicted, the increased standard errors do not necessarily reflect the absence of a relationship but possibly only a lack of degrees of freedom due to the introduction of the seasonality indicators.

Additionally, there are limitations of the data which may make it difficult to identify causal effects in a VAR approach. First, it is possible that monthly measures are too infrequent to capture causal effects if the real lag between effects is more shorter than one month. Importantly, structural tests on all models suggest strong evidence of instantaneous causality.

Taken together, VAR results suggest qualified evidence for both directions of causality. While the results are sensitive to the specification, the results are consistent with the possibility that both variables drive each other, but that highly robust evidence of this in one model is not possible due to the nature of the data and the high-parameter demands of the VAR approach.

% Table created by stargazer v.5.1 by Marek Hlavac, Harvard University. E-mail:
hlavac at fas.harvard.edu % Date and time: Mon, Oct 12, 2015 - 17:40:12

% Table created by stargazer v.5.1 by Marek Hlavac, Harvard University. E-mail:
hlavac at fas.harvard.edu % Date and time: Mon, Oct 12, 2015 - 17:40:13

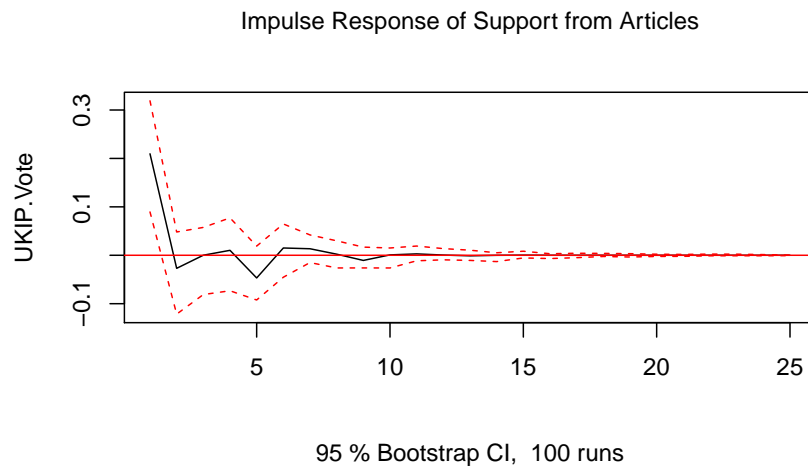
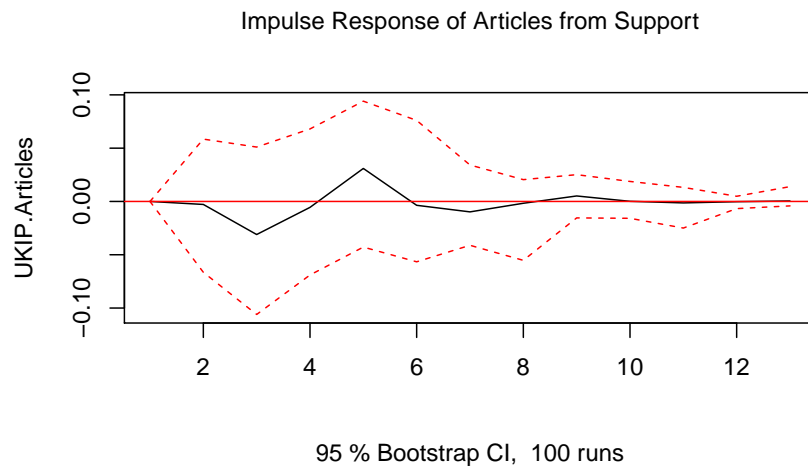


Table 1:

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	y	
	(1)	(2)
UKIP.Articles.l1	0.168* (0.095)	-0.387*** (0.094)
UKIP.Vote.l1	-0.483*** (0.106)	-0.007 (0.105)
UKIP.Articles.l2	0.160* (0.093)	-0.341*** (0.092)
UKIP.Vote.l2	-0.261** (0.103)	-0.085 (0.102)
UKIP.Articles.l3	0.161* (0.091)	-0.196** (0.090)
UKIP.Vote.l3	-0.111 (0.096)	-0.088 (0.096)
const	0.012 (0.080)	0.027 (0.079)
trend	0.00000 (0.001)	-0.0002 (0.001)
General.Elections	-0.099 (0.273)	0.185 (0.271)
EU.Elections	0.465 (0.296)	0.894*** (0.294)
Observations	137	137
R ²	0.148	0.233
Adjusted R ²	0.087	0.179
Residual Std. Error (df = 127)	0.445	0.443
F Statistic (df = 9; 127)	2.448**	4.284***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2: Granger Causality Tests

	Support	Articles
P-value	0.750	0.060
DF1	3	3
DF2	254	254
F-test	0.405	2.499

Process-tracing

This paper has investigated a simple claim by the UK’s regulatory authorities and national broadcaster: that the increased media coverage of UKIP was justified by the party’s increased poll ratings. We have found that, on the contrary, on average media coverage preceded an increase in poll ratings controlling for previous media coverage, rather than media coverage increasing controlling for previous public support. [some stuff on findings].

We have made three contributions with this study. Firstly, this is the first paper, in our knowledge, to address the visibility-support nexus in the context of the United Kingdom and a majoritarian system; previous research has primarily focused on other Western European democracies such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. De-

spite the change in political system, our findings support those of (Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden, 2010; Vliegenthart et al., 2012), and find that the media can and have independently generated support for UKIP. We have left aside the question of leader effects, given previously ambiguous findings. There is also reason to believe that media dynamics are different in proportional systems, being more diverse in their coverage than in majoritarian systems (???).

Secondly, we have also contributed methodologically in two ways. We have offered qualitative evidence for our findings that, at least in this case, the media have generated support for a radical right-wing party. Previous research has offered only statistical evidence, which may not pick up questions relating to the historical narrative of the party in question. We address this gap here and find that the results are still robust. We have also contributed to a growing body of literature that uses time-series methods to address questions relating to the media (Vliegenthart, 2014b).

Perhaps most importantly, these findings are of significance to contemporary public debate in the UK concerning the role of the media and the perceived unfair coverage of UKIP. Some have argued that the media coverage of UKIP is justified due to its public support. The findings here, on the other hand, suggest that the causal arrow points the other way: that the media coverage drove the support of UKIP independent of its previous poll ratings. As with all studies, there are limitations and areas for future research. Firstly, we do not undertake any form of content analysis to get at the actual content of the coverage in question, but only look at the quantity of articles. It is possible that, by disaggregating the coverage further, different types of coverage change the findings; it would also be interesting to see whether how positive or negative the coverage is matters for changing public opinion. Similarly, we do not disaggregate between types of paper, such as broadsheet and tabloid, which offer

different coverage and target a different readership.

We also only focus on print media. This means that we have not accounted for the effect of visual and social media which may be contributing to this relationship. Despite these limitations, this paper provides a contribution to the continuing and growing debate concerning the media's role in the growth of political parties and the wider ramifications for democratic debate.

Empirical fluctuation process

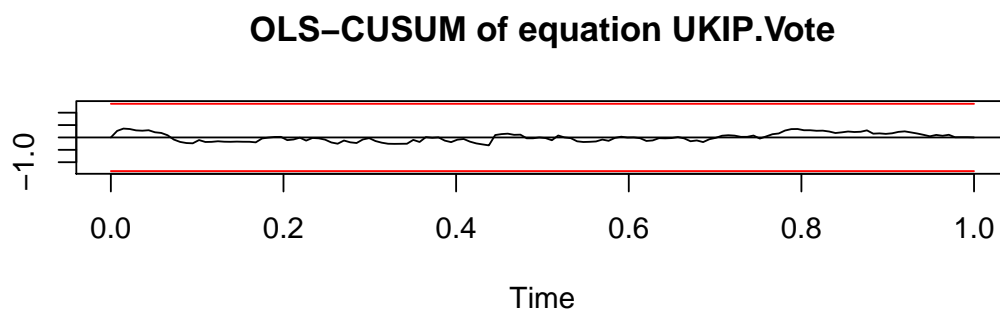
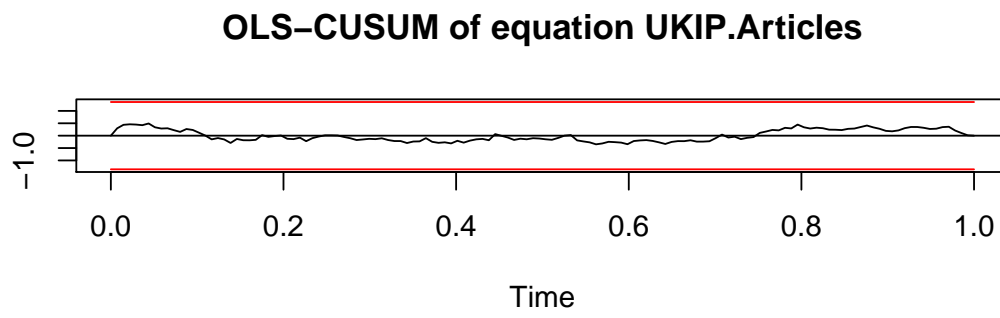


Figure 2:

References

Anon. (n.d.) "Nexis."

Art, David. (2007) "Reacting to the Radical Right Lessons from Germany and Austria." *Party Politics* 13:331–349. <http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/13/3/331> (Accessed October 10, 2015).

Boomgaarden, Hajo G, and Rens Vliegenthart. (2007) "Explaining the rise of anti-immigrant parties: The role of news media content." *Electoral Studies* 26:404–417.

Boomgaarden, Hajo G, and Rens Vliegenthart. (2009) "How news content influences anti-immigration attitudes: Germany, 1993–2005." *European Journal of Political Research* 48:516–542.

Bos, Linda, Wouter van der Brug, and Claes de Vreese. (2011) "How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing Populist Leaders." *Political Communication* 28:182–206.

Brug, Wouter van der, Holli A. Semetko, and Patti M. Valkenburg. (2006) "Media Priming in a Multi-Party Context: A Controlled Naturalistic Study in Political Communication." *Political Behavior* 29:115–141.
<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-006-9020-7> (Accessed October 3, 2015).

Cushion, Stephen, Richard Thomas, and Oliver Ellis. (2015) "Interpreting UKIP's 'Earthquake' in British Politics: UK Television News Coverage of the 2009 and 2014 EU Election Campaigns." *The Political Quarterly* 86:314–322.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.12169/abstract> (Accessed October 1, 2015).

- Dennison, James, and Matthew Goodwin. (2015) "Immigration, Issue Ownership and the Rise of UKIP." *Parliamentary Affairs* 68:168–187.
http://pa.oxfordjournals.org/content/68/suppl_1/168 (Accessed October 1, 2015).
- Goodwin, Matthew, and Robert Ford. (2013) "Just how much media coverage does UKIP get?" *New Statesman*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/11/just-how-much-media-coverage-does-ukip-get>.
- Ipsos-MORI. (n.d.) "Voting Intention in Great Britain: Recent Trends."
<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=107&view=wide>.
- Mudde, Cas. (2013) "Three decades of populist radical right parties in Western Europe: So what?" *European Journal of Political Research* 52:1–19.
- Pauwels, Teun. (2010) "Reassessing conceptualization, data and causality: A critique of Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart's study on the relationship between media and the rise of anti-immigrant parties." *Electoral Studies* 29:269–275.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379410000120> (Accessed October 10, 2015).
- Rooduijn, Matthijs. (2014) "The Mesmerising Message: The Diffusion of Populism in Public Debates in Western European Media." *Political Studies* 62:726–744.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9248.12074/abstract> (Accessed October 2, 2015).
- Sellers, Patrick J., and Brian F. Schaffner. (2007) "Winning Coverage in the U.S. Senate." *Political Communication* 24:377–391.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600701641516> (Accessed October 11, 2015).
- Soussi, Alasdair. (2014) "Did British media help the UKIP win EU poll?"

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/06/did-british-media-help-ukip-win-eu-poll-20146313346918679.html>.

Stevenson, Alex. (2014) “Caroline Lucas points finger at media’s Farage obsession.” <http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2014/05/29/ukip-victory-caroline-lucas-points-finger-at-media-s-farage>.

Sweeney, Mark. (2015) “BBC prepares to boost Ukip coverage as it ranks it a larger party in election.” <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/15/bbc-prepares-to-boost-ukip-coverage-as-it-ranks-it-a-larger-party-in-election>.

Syal, Rajeev. (2015) “Ukip faces crisis after suspensions and racism claims.” <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/20/ukip-faces-crisis-two-parliamentary-candidates-suspended-one-resigns>.

Tresch, Anke. (2009) “Politicians in the Media: Determinants of Legislators’ Presence and Prominence in Swiss Newspapers.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14:67–90. <http://hij.sagepub.com/content/14/1/67> (Accessed October 11, 2015).

Vliegthart, Rens. (2014a) “Moving up. Applying aggregate level time series analysis in the study of media coverage.” *Quality & Quantity* 48:2427–2445.

Vliegthart, Rens. (2014b) “Moving up. Applying aggregate level time series analysis in the study of media coverage.” *Quality & Quantity* 48:2427–2445.

Vliegthart, Rens, and Hajo G. Boomgaarden. (2010) “Why the media matter after all: A response to Pauwels.” *Electoral Studies* 29:719–723. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379410000855> (Accessed October 11, 2015).

Vliegthart, Rens, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, and Joost Van Spanje. (2012)

“Anti-Immigrant Party Support and Media Visibility: A Cross-Party, Over-Time Perspective.” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 22:315–358.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2012.693933> (Accessed October 10, 2015).

WALGRAVE, STEFAAN, and KNUT DE SWERT. (2004) “The Making of the (Issues of the) Vlaams Blok.” *Political Communication* 21:479–500.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600490522743> (Accessed October 10, 2015).

Webb, Robert. (2014) “Ukip trades in the language of fear and division. The left must not humour its anti-politics crusade.”

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/05/>

[ukip-trades-language-fear-and-division-left-must-not-humour-its-anti-politics](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/05/ukip-trades-language-fear-and-division-left-must-not-humour-its-anti-politics).

Wintour, Patrick. (2015) “Ofcom deals blow to Greens election debate hopes but boosts Ukips.” <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/08/>

[ofcom-blow-green-party-election-debate-boost-ukips](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/08/ofcom-blow-green-party-election-debate-boost-ukips).