

**All News is Bad News:
Newspaper Coverage of Political Parties in Spain**

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Abstract

Spain has a highly partisan media system, with newspapers reaching self-selected partisan audiences and espousing explicitly partisan editorial preferences. Do the newspapers of the left and right differ in how they cover politics in ways that can be predicted by their partisan leanings? We review theories of issue-ownership, journalistic standards, and information scarcity and test hypotheses derived from each. We find that the parties converge substantially in virtually every aspect of their coverage. Few differences emerge when we look at what topics are covered or in the dynamics of which topics gain attention over time. However, we confirm important differences across the papers when they make explicit reference to individual political parties. Journalistic norms result in a surprising focus on the faults of one's enemies, however, rather than the virtues of one's allies. Our assessment is based on a comprehensive database of all front-page stories in *El País* and *El Mundo*, Spain's largest daily newspapers, from 1996 through 2011.

Keywords: political parties, political communication, agenda-setting, media and politics, Spain

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News Coverage in a Partisan Environment

Spain has a highly partisan media environment, with the major newspapers distinguished by clearly delineated preferences by political party. This affects their readership as well as their editorial positions. How does it affect their coverage of politics? We offer the first large-scale analysis of the similarities and differences in media attention of politics in the highly partisan media environment of Spain.

Two important perspectives help illuminate the potential impact of partisanship on media coverage. The first, stemming from the literature on issue-ownership and partisan distinctions, suggests that partisans of the left and right might be presented with entirely distinct newspaper environments. In the extreme, readers of individual newspapers would be exposed to different patterns of news coverage, essentially living in separate news “silos” with little overlap. Of course we do not expect completely distinct agendas in any western democracy, but in the extreme, one could imagine that readers of a particular newspaper would read news painting a rosy picture of the ideological allies and perhaps ignoring actions by those who are from the out-party. This might relate not only to how issues are explained and covered, but also to which topics are considered newsworthy. According to an issue-ownership idea, we might expect left-leaning papers to emphasize issues such as unemployment, social services, and the environment while right-leaning papers might focus on crime, the business climate, and defense, for example. Taken to the extreme, an issue-ownership theory would lead us to expect that partisans of the left and of the right would be exposed to distinct media content, reinforcing the initial partisan divides and generating a cycle of distinct partisan communities with little overlap, understanding, or common concern.

A rival perspective on partisanship in the news would be the journalistic competition hypothesis. Based on the idea of covering what is “news,” which might be driving by real-world

events, by the actions of government officials, or by the competition for readership, newspapers of different partisan affiliations might nonetheless cover a similar set of issues. They might put a different spin on the issue, perhaps, but would publish articles on a similar set of topics.

Clearly, democratic debate and civic discourse cannot be enhanced when rival partisan camps are exposed to highly segmented slices of information designed to perpetuate partisan divide. So the degree to which newspapers and other media outlets of rival partisan leanings present similar or divergent issue-agendas to their readers is an important test of the health of a nation's media system. Civil democratic discourse and debate requires a common set of empirical reference points, so the degree to which one observes overlap in the topics of news coverage is an important element of the health of a media system.

Spain's highly politicized media environment allows a good test of these two perspectives. Our investigation of the contents of over 100,000 front-page newspaper stories from the nation's two leading dailies indicates that they follow a similar agenda. The overwhelming majority of newspaper coverage of politics and public policy follows a similar pattern in the two news papers. Both show a great deal of deference to the sitting government; both cover a similar range of issues; both cover the two leading parties almost to the exclusion of smaller actors; in sum, their patterns of coverage could scarcely be more similar (see Chaqués Bonafont and Baumgartner 2013). However, when the two newspapers focus their attention on individual political parties, they show their biases. Rather than vaunt the proposals of their allied party or draw attention to the issues thought to be advantageous to them, however, we find that the bias comes in how they treat their rival. Each paper under-emphasizes the role of their allied party and over-plays the faults of the rival. Thus, the left-leaning *El País* provides much greater coverage of the Popular Party (PP), especially when government officials of the PP are involved

in corruption scandals. In almost perfect parallel, the right-leaning *El Mundo* provides much less coverage of these scandals. But when a Socialist Party (PSOE) government is beset with similar corruption issues, the newspaper with most coverage is, naturally, the rival one. We therefore fail to confirm expectations from the issue-ownership literature, even though we can identify some partisan differences in coverage. In all, Spain's two major national dailies have highly similar news agendas. But when they cover the activities of the political parties, all news is bad news.

Literature and Expectations

Journalists in Spain like elsewhere are expected to cover the news. Journalistic norms, economic competition for readers, and real-world events suggest that readers of different media outlets will see stories on a relatively similar set of topics, and that these will change over time in parallel (see for example Norris 2000, 2001, 2009; Chaqués-Bonafont and Baumgartner 2013). This suggests:

H1, Journalistic norms: The distribution of coverage by policy topic is driven by journalistic norms and should therefore be similar across the two newspapers.

Lance Bennett (1991) proposed the indexing theory whereby journalists focusing on government give special place to “official” sources, discounting opinions that are marginal or not represented in the halls of government, and giving priority to the routine reporting of the actions of government officials. The media may reflect the debates among government officials and their rivals within the political establishment (Entman 2004, 4), but coverage is driven by the elites, not the independent judgments of the journalists. There are many reasons to expect some aspects of this indexing theory to hold: The media pays special attention to governmental actors because they are a legitimate source of information, fairly easy to obtain (through press releases

or written reports) and relatively costless (Castells 2010). This is especially convenient in a context of increasing business competition and reduction of market shares, in which most media companies have reduced the set of economic and human resources devoted to the direct coverage of news, and thus their capacity to independently provide reliable and contrasted information (Carrant et al. 2011). Hence:

H2, Government indexing: Journalists report on the actions of “official” sources, and both newspapers should therefore give enhanced coverage to government officials, no matter what the party in power.

A rarely discussed element of Bennett’s theory is its “mainstream government debate” bias. He writes that the media “tend to index the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic” (Bennett 1990, 106). Most of time, the media abdicates from the normative mandate of giving voice to the people providing independent and plural information, and only occasionally take into account the points of view different from the mainstream official view of the government and the most prominent political parties. He suggests that journalists cover “official” beats and therefore index their coverage to the actions of government officials. They also look for response by other mainstream political actors outside of government. They do not, however, look to the fringes of the political system for viewpoints that may be loud and clear to those who look but which fall outside of the major political parties. In Spain, what this suggests is an extensive focus by the mainstream media on the two major political parties, well beyond their importance in the polls. Since 1996, the PP has received between 38 and 45 percent of the popular vote in successive legislative elections, and the PSOE 29 to 44; together they have gotten between 73 and 84 percent of the vote. Other parties, especially regional ones powerful in

Catalonia or in the Basque country, may be expected to receive less than their proportionate share of media coverage, following from Bennett's indexing theory.

H3, Reinforcement of the partisan elite: Both newspapers will be highly selective in their attention to political parties, focusing largely on the two predominant parties and rarely covering smaller and regional parties.

Dependence of the media towards governmental actors is especially important for issues like foreign affairs and defense for two main reasons: first, these are *obstrusive issues* for which most journalists may not have direct experience, or the resources to gather information directly. Second, these are issues for which the executive has *institutional ownership* –this is, formal rules guarantee a predominant role of the executive in front of other policy actor in the policy-making process (Walgrave et al. 2008). As in many other majoritarian democracies, in Spain the head of the executive occupies a leading role in the policy making process, and this is especially the case for foreign and defense policy and for questions relating to the European Union; in these areas the Prime Minister's office (*Presidente del Gobierno*) almost monopolizes the agenda-setting process. The decision to send military troops corresponds exclusively to the Prime Minister, which also concentrates all the political responsibility and electoral costs associated with that decision.

In relation to defense and international issues, the Spanish parliament plays a subordinate position. It is the Prime Minister who leads the process of European integration, participates in EU meetings and negotiates vis-à-vis other heads of government important aspects of the agenda that will be later implemented at the national level. Once the decision is made at the EU level, it is quite difficult, costly and time consuming to amend EU decisions in the parliamentary arena.

Accordingly, most stories about the EU, international affairs, or defense will inform about the activities and policy positions of the Prime Minister, and thus we expect:

H4, Government information advantage: For foreign policy, defense, and EU-related issues, governmental information advantage is so great that both newspapers should offer greater coverage to government officials in these areas compared to others, no matter the party in power.

The secondary role of political parties on issues for which the executive has institutional ownership also depends on the degree of controversy or disagreement about these issues. As the issue-ownership framework would suggest, it is not rewarding in political terms to pay attention to issues about which everybody agrees (Green-Pedersen and Stubbager 2011). The general agreement about the benefits of the EU that traditionally has characterized Spanish politics prevents political parties from seeking media attention on EU matters. By contrast, political parties will seek media attention when they have an alternative and strong claim, different from the governmental position on a particular issue (Entman 2004). This is the case of the Iraq conflict at the beginning of the new century. The entry in the war of Iraq was one of the most controversial decisions taken by the majority government of José Maria Aznar, generating an intense and politicized debate in and out of the parliamentary arena. Political parties and other policy actors, mainly social movements, gained some media access reflecting the opposition to the military intervention in Iraq by most of the Spanish population.

In short, in a context of agenda scarcity political parties will concentrate their efforts to gain access in relation to issues that either have a strong capacity to erode the political position of the government, or reinforce issue-ownership. As rational actors they will devote their attention strategically across issues depending on whether the electorate identifies them as

capable to give an optimal solution, taking into account the electoral rewards associated with that action (Green-Pedersen 2006; Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Klingemann et al. 1994).

The media systems literature would stress that the capacity of policy actors to get media access is also affected by the features of each media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In a politicized media system like Spain, characterized by strong connections between media groups and political parties, and high degree of political parallelism of readers one may expect access of political elites to the front pages of *El País* and *El Mundo* is unbalanced across newspapers depending on their ideological leaning. If the issue-ownership hypothesis is correct we should expect two hypotheses to be true, one relating to issue-selection and one to party advantage:

H5, Issue-selection: The left-leaning paper will provide greater coverage of the topics of environment and social matters while the right-leaning paper will focus more on economic issues.

H6, Party advantage: The left-leaning paper will provide greater coverage of the PSOE while the right-leaning paper will give greater coverage of the PP.

An alternative perspective is that newspapers are not able simply to focus on the parties or issues they prefer. Journalist norms and agenda-setting dynamics constrain them to focus on similar issues most of the time. Occasionally, events give the opportunity to portray a sitting government in an unflattering light. While the indexing theory above suggests that all parties would cover these issues, since they affect government leaders and may be salient politically, a partisan logic suggests the likelihood of differences in degree. We therefore expect that the newspaper of the rival ideological camp to the government will give greater attention to scandal compared to the ideologically allied media outlet. In doing so, newspapers will follow the ongoing political debate, highlighting the failures and inconsistencies of the opposing party in

relation to vastly politicized issues, focusing on what is wrong, and always giving the bad news. If this argument is correct we should expect:

H7, Faults of the partisan opponent: Newspapers will seek to highlight the flaws of their partisan rivals by focusing on embarrassing stories relating to their rivals when they are in government, such as corruption issues.

Note that our last hypothesis is distinct from a simple issue-ownership one. It refers only to bad news and suggests that newspapers may systematically contribute to the public perception that politics is inherently corrupt. If the allied paper refuses to cover the topic when an allegation is laid down, but the opposition paper enthusiastically attempts to keep the topic on the front pages, the net result may be more coverage of bad news than good. If generalized, this may be a reason for increased levels of public distrust of government.

Data

To analyze who gets into the news, and who gets formally identified in a policy debate we take into account the content of all the front pages stories of *El Mundo* and *El País*, for the period 1996 to 2011. To do that we rely on the databases of the Spanish policy agendas project (www.ub.edu/spanishpolicyagendas) developed following the methodology of the Comparative Policy Agendas project (www.comparativeagendas.info). The database consists of every story on the front page of the two papers from January 1, 1996 through December 31, 2011: 50,775 stories from *El País* and 56,540 stories for *El Mundo*. For each story we have recorded the date of publication, title, and the topic of the story which is classified according to 23 major topics and 247 subtopics. In order to explain who has access, these databases provide information about the actors involved in each story. We gathered information about whether the story mentions the members of the executive (Prime Minister, Ministries, and/or the Head of the State), members of

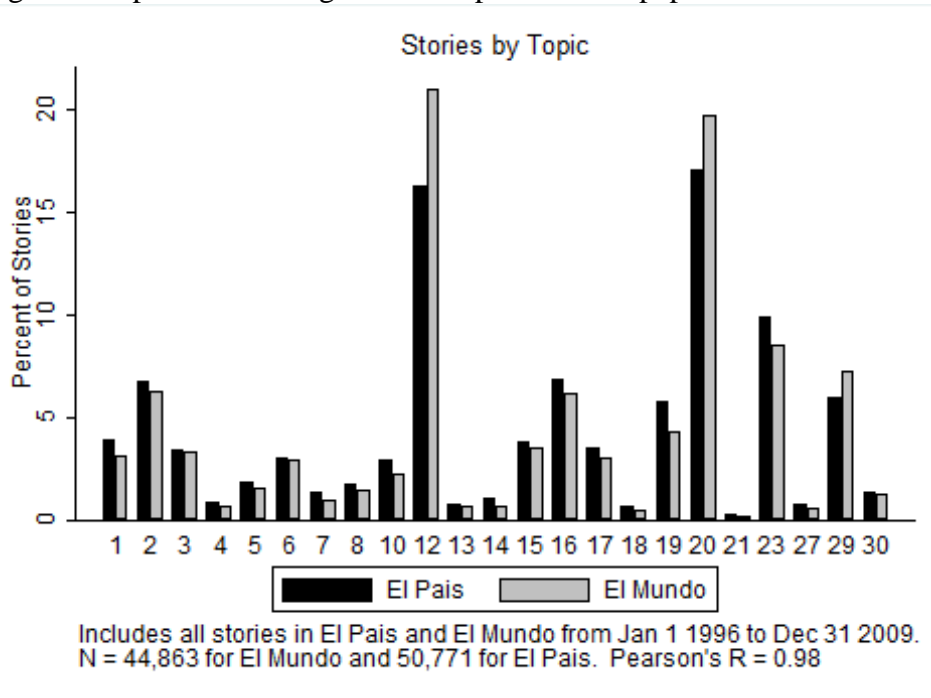
the Spanish parliament; political parties (with and without representation in Parliament); regional political elites (the head of the regional government) regional parliaments; and interest organizations (interest groups, social movements). Each story has been coded by two different coders with a reliability of 93.25 percent at the topic level and 90.35 percent at the subtopic level.

Results

Our empirical approach is very simple. The seven hypotheses above suggest very clear comparisons across the two countries: Are the contents of the two papers similar or different in ways consistent with each?

Figure 1 addresses the first hypothesis. Do the two newspapers cover the same topics? The figure shows the percent of stories on the front pages of each paper by the major topics of the Spanish Agendas Project. As the note makes clear, the correlation between these levels of coverage is 0.98. We have discussed this essential finding in greater length in an article devoted to this topic (Chaqués Bonafont and Baumgartner 2013) and the figure is similar to what is presented there. Many reasons cause both newspapers to converge on the same topics: They follow similar sources, they follow events in the real-world, and they respond to government officials. But it is clear that one does not focus on health and welfare issues while the other writes constantly about business regulation. The two are much more attuned to a common view of what is news than a simple issue-ownership view would suggest.

Figure 1. Topics of Coverage in Two Spanish Newspapers.

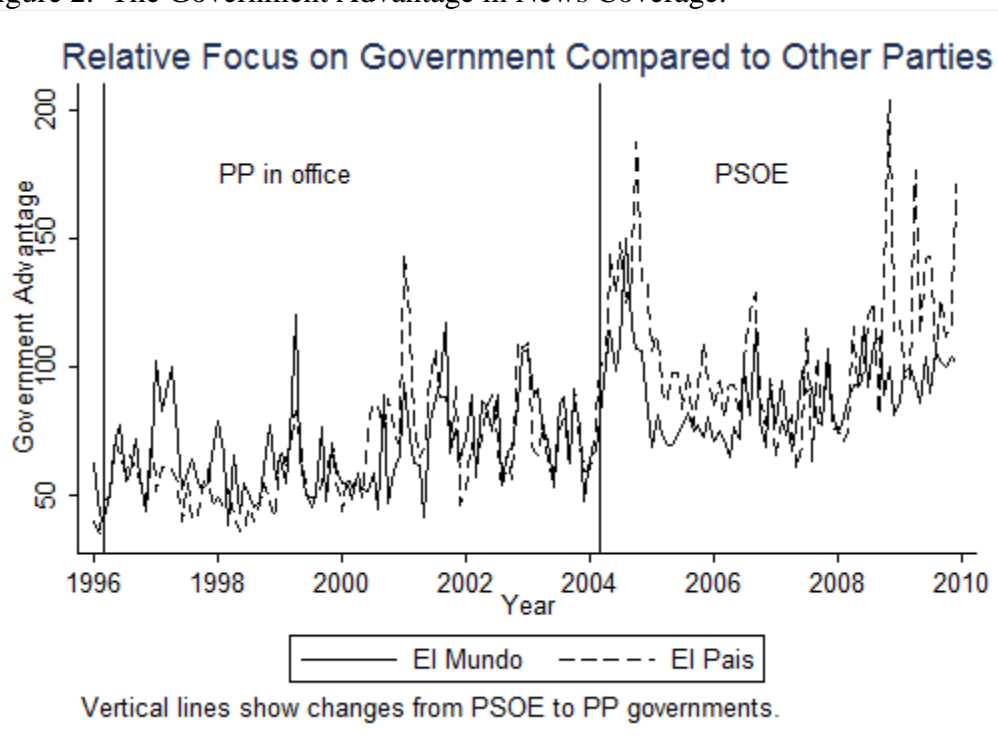


Source: Spanish Agendas Project. Numbers along the bottom refer to policy topic codes. See Appendix A for the list of topics.

Next we consider the privileged role of government officials.

Figure 2 shows the relative mention of the governmental party as compared to the opposition party over time.

Figure 2. The Government Advantage in News Coverage.



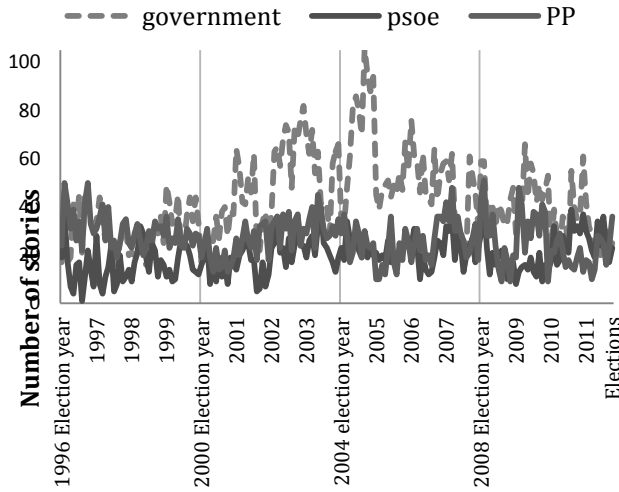
Note: The figure shows the difference between mentions of the PP compared to that of the PSOE in the two papers.

Figure 2 shows a dramatic governmental advantage. In all cases, both newspapers show a tendency to print more stories mentioning the governing party as compared to the rival party. This advantage is typically on the order of two additional front-page mentions per month (corresponding to a value of 60 on the graph), but occasionally moves to levels three times that high. Differences across papers are minor, clearly demonstrating that this is an issue of journalistic norms rather than partisan choice.

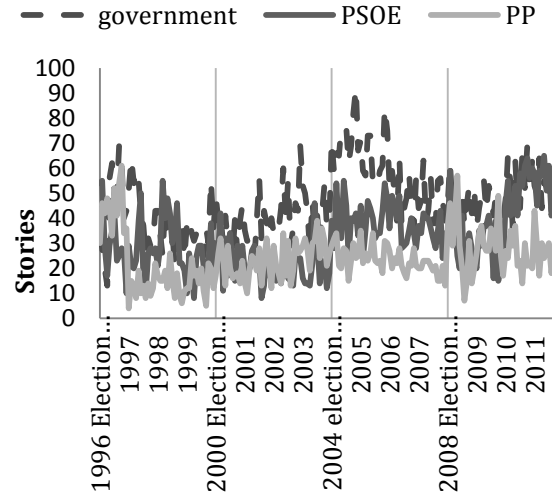
Figure 3 shows the number of stories mentioning the government itself as well as the two main parties, separately for the two newspapers.

Figure 3. Coverage of the Government, PP, and PSOE.

A. *El País*



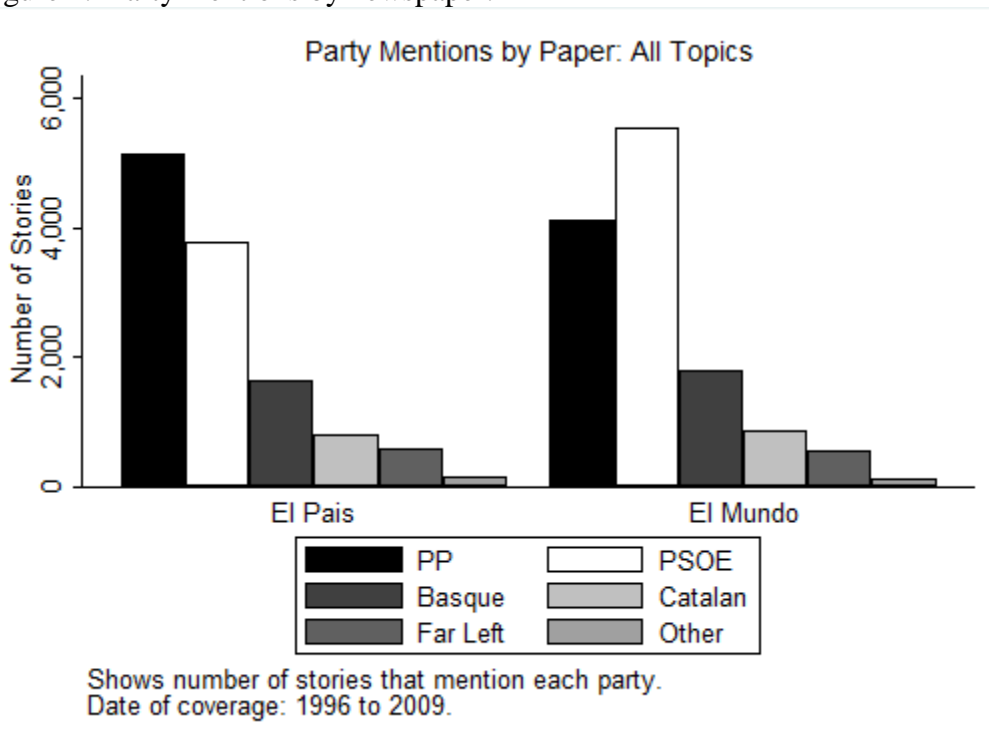
B. *El Mundo*



The governmental party consistently enjoys a significant advantage in coverage compared to the main opposition party. These trends are remarkably similar in the two newspapers, suggesting that Bennett's (1991) indexing theory is more prominent in explaining these trends than any effort by ideologically driven editors to help the party to which they feel greater warmth. Further, Figure 3 clearly shows that both parties gain significant coverage, even in the rival newspaper, when they are in power. Thus, we confirm H2.

Figure 4 relates to our third hypothesis, that the parties will focus on the two largest parties to the relative exclusion of smaller and regional parties.

Figure 4. Party mentions by newspaper.



Clearly, both parties focus on the two major parties. Further analysis (not shown here) suggests that the Basque and Catalan parties are newsworthy mostly when “relevant” issues are discussed: regional autonomy issues, or Basque-related terrorism issues. The far left parties, unrelated to regional concerns, receive significantly less coverage proportionately than their results in popular elections would suggest they might. Clearly, there is a bias toward the establishment.

The figure also allows us to begin to look at H6 and 7. These relate to which party would have an advantage in which newspaper. *El País* leans left while *El Mundo* leans right; therefore H6 would lead us to expect that the PSOE would be more commonly mentioned in the first paper and the PP in the second. Figure 4 shows, however, that the opposite is true. Given that both parties controlled the Government for roughly equivalent periods during the time of our study, this clearly supports H7, that the newspapers tend to focus on their rivals, not their allies.

H4 relates to the government information advantage. Figure 5 shows the percentage of all stories by policy topic, for both papers (that is, the total percentages, across the topics, sum to 100). The clear bars show all coverage, and the black bars show coverage mentioning any actor within the federal executive branch (e.g., the Prime Minister, a minister, or an agency of government at the national level). If the black bar is higher than the clear bar, then this is an area where government actors are mentioned more than on average in other stories. In the right part of the figure, the same data are shown but sorted by the relative focus on the government.

Figure 5. Government advantage in news coverage of Defense etc.

A. Sorted by Policy Topic Code

B. Sorted by Relative Government Focus

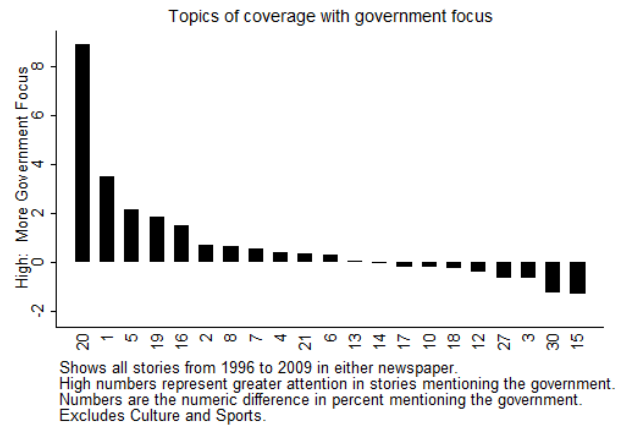
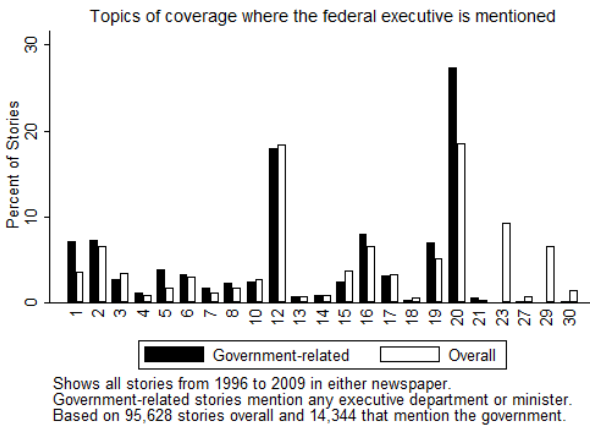
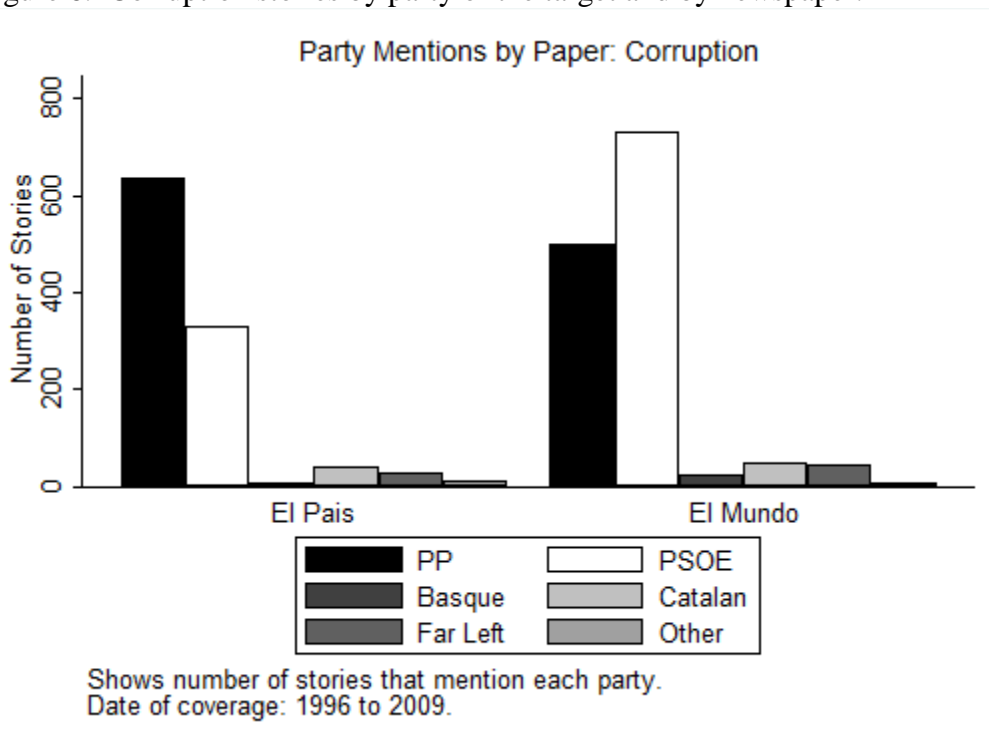


Figure 5 shows that government advantage is greatest on topics 20 (government operations), 1 (macro-economics), 5 (labor), 19 (international affairs), and 16 (defense) (other topics show less than a one-percent difference, or a relative disadvantage for government – note that the figure excludes topics 23 and 29 (culture and sports) where the government is virtually never mentioned). Thus, we confirm the information advantage hypothesis, but also find that the hypothesis is incomplete. Government advantage is not limited to foreign and defense issues; it extends especially into economic affairs. We will see below that the focus on topic 20, government operations, may reflect the “bad news” hypothesis rather than an informational advantage for the national executive.

Our fifth hypothesis relates to issue-ownership: The left-leaning paper should focus on topics such as environment and social welfare while the right-leaning paper should be more attuned to economic issues. Figure 1 above showed the distribution of stories by topic in the two papers. Patterns of attention do not correspond to these expectations. For the most part, topics are similar and those differences that do emerge do not correspond to a simple issue-ownership logic. The left paper is more focused on economics, defense, international, and culture, while the right paper covers more issues of crime, government operations, and sports. For the most part, we disconfirm H5, as we did H6.

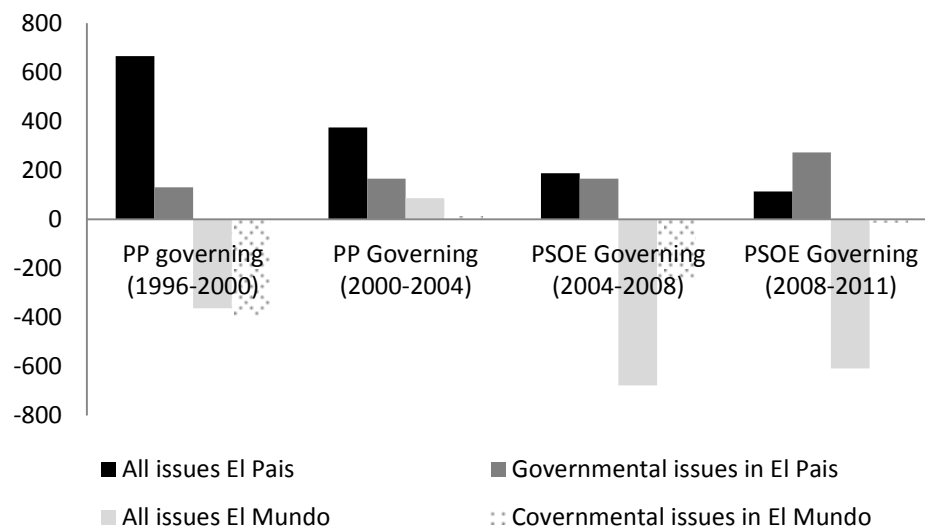
Our final hypothesis relates to bad news. Here we focus on the topic of political corruption scandals. When corruption stories occur, who covers them? It depends on who is the target. Figure 6 makes clear that if one seeks news about the corruption scandal of a given official, it is best to read the paper ideologically hostile to them.

Figure 6. Corruption stories by party of the target and by newspaper.



Figures 7 and 8 suggest that there is a combination of timing and partisanship going on here. Corruption scandals, and news in general relating to the incumbent government are simply more newsworthy than events relating to parties in the opposition. Therefore, to get a better handle on how corruption issues are handled by the two newspapers, we divide the coverage by time period. Figure 7 compares overall coverage with government-related coverage in the two newspapers across four time periods.

Figure 7. Relative attention to the PP as compared to the PSOE.



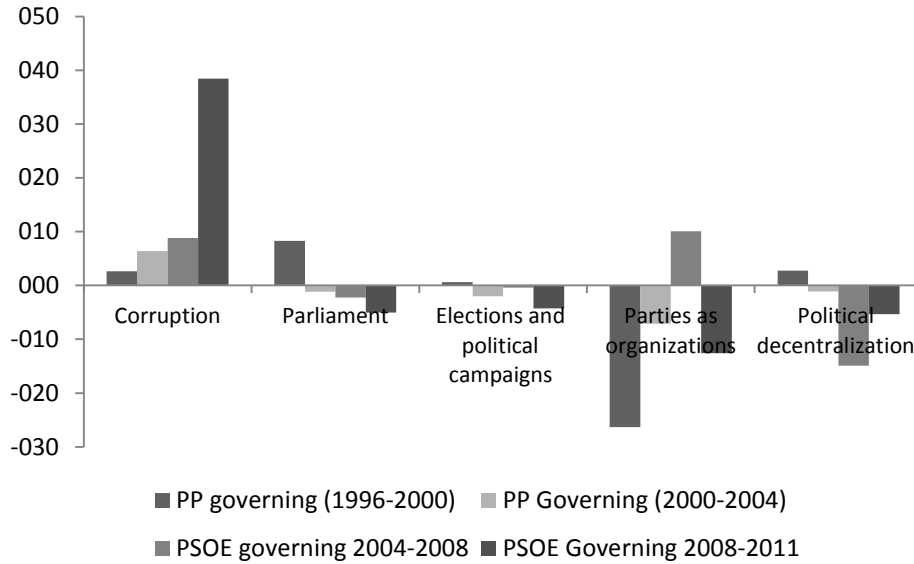
Note: Numbers reflect the number of PP mentions minus PSOE mentions.

Within any time period, comparing the first and the third bars (or the second and the fourth bars) in Figure 7 shows the difference across newspapers in similar issues. *El País* consistently shows more interest in the PP than in the PSOE, and the opposite is true for *El Mundo*. But these trends differ depending on which party is in power and on if we consider all news coverage or only government operations issues directly.

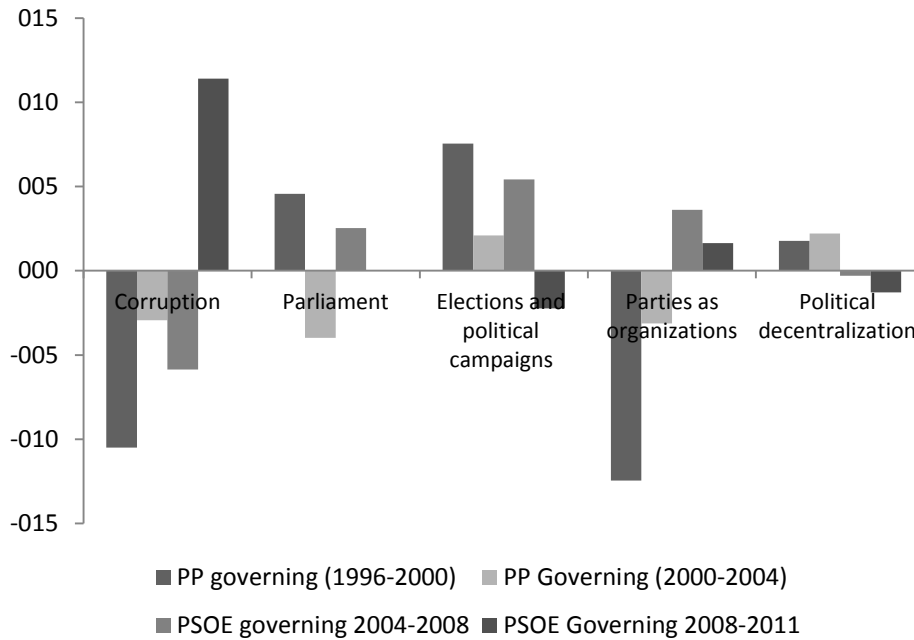
Figure 8 delves more deeply in these comparisons by looking at a number of distinct policy issues: corruption, parliamentary issues, elections, parties, and political decentralization. First for *El País* and then for *El Mundo*, the figure compares four time periods, showing the

relative attention to the PP minus that of the PSOE. Positive numbers therefore represent a higher percentage of total attention to the PP as compared to the PSOE.

Figure 8. Differences in percentage of attention about Governmental Issues (PP-PSOE)
El País



El Mundo



Discussion

We have compared media coverage across more than 20 years of Spanish politics. The two leading national newspapers clearly allow Spanish democracy to be based on a relatively common set of understandings of what are the issues. We found virtually no support for any hypotheses suggesting partisan preference or issue-ownership. While there are some minor differences across the papers, these are not systematically related to partisan advantage. Further, the levels of attention across policy topics are highly similar, on average. Both papers exhibit a great deal of deference to the sitting Prime Minister, especially in those issue-domains where the national executive has an information advantage: economics, foreign, and defense matters. But he does not dominate media coverage alone; rival parties are also discussed, as long as attention focuses on the mainstream, not the fringe or smaller parties. Where the most important ideological differences emerge, it is in the area of covering corruption scandals. Where a government official of the rival ideological camp is in the spotlight, attention burns brightly. Where an allied official is targeted, journalists decide they can leave this coverage to their rivals. So, we can confirm that partisanship generally plays a surprisingly small role in determining what topics are newsworthy in Spain's leading newspapers, but that when attention focuses on the political parties themselves, all news is bad news. This may be good news indeed for the contribution of the newspapers to a healthy democratic debate.

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Appendix A. List of Major Topic Codes in the Spanish Agendas Project.

Topic	Description
1	Economy
2	Rights
3	Health
4	Agriculture
5	Labor
6	Education
7	Environment
8	Energy
10	Transport
12	Justice
13	Social
14	Housing
15	Business
16	Defense
17	Science
18	Foreign Trade
19	International
20	Government
21	Public Lands
23	Culture
27	Weather
29	Sports
30	Death Notices