

## **The Whole World Is Watching: Comparing European and United States News Coverage of the U.S. 2008 and 2016 Elections**

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United States presidential election campaigns provide a unique opportunity to study how media in different countries cover the same “international” event. Although campaign research is flourishing, it is unclear to what extent U.S. and European media cover campaigns differently. Therefore, this study analyzes how the U.S. press covered both the 2008 and 2016 campaigns in comparison with the press in 6 West European countries. We analyze 2 central characteristics of campaign coverage: (1) the tone or degree of negativity and (2) the substantial nature of the coverage. Our results confirm that substantial issue coverage is low, and a negative view of candidates and the campaign is prevailing. Although there is variation in the coverage within and between the countries under study, structural differences between the press in the U.S. and Europe are almost absent. In line with the idea of media convergence, this suggests that we can no longer distinguish the campaign coverage of U.S. and European newspapers. We argue that shared news values and the specific context of campaigns determine news coverage across the board.

*Keywords: election campaigns, comparative research, content analysis*

There is broad consensus about the central role of the news media in election campaigns. The mass media are not the only channel through which parties and candidates can reach voters, but they are undoubtedly the most important one. In past decades, the news media have become less dependent on politics and, as a result, rely more on their own logic (Strömbäck, 2008). The growing independent role of the media during campaigns can partly explain the fascination of political communication scholars with

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media coverage of election campaigns, which has become important research objects in almost all Western democracies (Semetko, 1996). These studies have given us insights into the (sometimes limited) media impact on voters, as well as political agendas and news management tactics, and overall have enhanced our knowledge of how politics is covered in the news (Gulati, Just, & Crigler, 2004). For scholars in many democracies, content analysis of election coverage has become as natural as the election campaign itself.

Yet despite the abundance of research on media coverage of national campaigns, it remains striking how little we know about how campaign media coverage differs between countries. Scholars agree that analyzing the variation between countries is crucial to fully understanding the production of election coverage (Gulati et al., 2004; Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Kaid & Strömbäck, 2008). The problem is not only that the number of comparative studies is limited (see below) but rather that they mostly compare the coverage of different elections in different countries. Is it the nature of the media system, the particular political rules of the election game in question, or simply the (exceptional) campaign context that accounts for different campaign coverage? Even the long tradition of comparative studies on the European elections campaigns can only partly overcome this problem, as there is no common European campaign, but rather several national campaigns. Thus, only the coinciding campaigns of the different member states are studied (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006).

In this article, we start to fill the gap of examining cross-national media coverage of campaigns by focusing on how journalists in different countries covered a single type of event: U.S. presidential election campaigns. Presidential campaigns in the U.S. have always received international attention, but the 2008 campaign, with the election of Barack Obama, was seen as a historic event that garnered exceptionally high levels of coverage by media outlets all over the world. This global attention is impressive, and in sharp contrast with the limited coverage from U.S. media for elections in other countries (Golan & Wanta, 2003). The 2008 campaign also led to attention from scholars outside the U.S., with studies comparing how different foreign media covered that U.S. campaign (Holtz-Bacha & Zeh, 2011; Strömbäck, Painter, & Fernandes, 2011; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, Van Aelst, & de Vreese, 2010). Because these studies all focus on an identical foreign event, this approach allows for a comparison of different media systems' coverage of the same campaign. These studies have identified some variables that could account for any cross-country variation we might find. The campaign study of Vliegenthart and colleagues (Boomgaarden, Van Aelst, & de Vreese, 2010), for example, showed that the public opinion vis-à-vis the incumbent U.S. president affected the tone of the newspapers' coverage from eight European countries, with challenger Barack Obama receiving more positive coverage in countries where opinion was particularly negative about the Bush presidency. A more global study by Strömbäck and colleagues (2011), examining media from Europe, Asia, and the Middle-East, came to similar findings with more positive coverage of Obama compared with McCain in countries that were disenchanted with the Bush administration. At the same time, the authors did not find an effect of different types of "anti-American" feelings in these countries and concluded that there was a "more or less global perception that Obama's candidacy transcended long-held beliefs in the cultural, social, and systemic biases of American politics" (Strömbäck et al., 2011, p. 290).

In this article, we take a slightly different approach by comparing how the European press and the U.S. press cover two different U.S. election campaigns that received massive global attention. In the literature, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the news media in European countries are

following a trend of "Americanization" and whether their news coverage still differs from U.S. news coverage (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001). However, because election campaigns in most European (multiparty) countries are still very different from the U.S. context, it is hard to determine whether differences can be attributed to a different style of campaign coverage by journalists, or rather by differences in European versus U.S. electoral system and traditions of political campaigning. For instance, Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011) find that Swedish media frame their 2006 election more in terms of issues and less as a strategic game compared with U.S. media coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election. However, in such a comparison it is practically impossible to determine whether this larger focus on substantial issues in the Swedish press can be attributed to journalistic practice or rather to a stronger focus on issues by the main candidates and parties in each country, and thus differences across election campaigns. Similar questions arise with regard to negativity: Can we blame the U.S. media for their highly negative coverage of U.S. campaigns (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Patterson, 2000), or is this pattern simply a consequence of the U.S. tradition of negative campaigning by politicians (e.g., Lau & Rovner, 2009)?

Overall, we expect that differences between news coverage of the U.S. elections in Europe and the U.S. will be limited, mainly because of the broader idea of media convergence. We argue that political journalists in both parts of the world are driven by similar professional news values and commercial incentives, which will lead to comparable news coverage (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, we are well aware that comparing the U.S. coverage with foreign coverage of the U.S. campaign is not a perfect apples-to-apples comparison. U.S. news media are expected to inform their readers as voters, while the European press do not have this obligation and can take a more outsider approach. This difference in audience might lead to differences in the coverage of the campaign. We will use these contrary expectations when interpreting the findings of our study. The findings are based on an analysis of the coverage of the U.S. election campaigns in 2008 and in 2016 by newspapers in six Western European countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands, Spain, UK) as well as the U.S. We do not claim these two campaigns are typical for U.S. campaigns in general or allow a comparison over time, but merely use them to test whether specific campaign dynamics drive the coverage. We focus on two central characteristics of news reporting that are commonly researched in election campaign media studies and seen as part of the broader process of the mediatization of politics (e.g., Zeh & Hopmann, 2013). First, we question the substantial nature of the coverage and analyze the extent to which attention to the horse race, and the candidates, was present compared with substantive issue coverage. This examination addresses a classical aspect of campaign coverage, as issue-based coverage influences the degree to which citizens learn about the issues at stake, as opposed to focusing their attention on who is winning or losing the race (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). Second, we study the tone (i.e., degree of negativity) of the coverage. This aspect of coverage is important, as it can codetermine how people perceive the candidates and can also influence (dis)trust in politics in general (Van Aelst, 2017). Before explaining our research design in more detail and discussing our results, we give an overview of earlier campaign studies with special attention for the differences and similarities between the findings in the U.S. and Western Europe.

### **Studying Election Campaigns**

The growing scholarly attention for media coverage of campaigns is justified by the importance of elections for democracy (Swanson & Mancini, 1996). During those periods voters decide on who will have

power and who will not. The fact that ever more voters postpone their final decision until the last weeks, or even days, before the election has further increased the importance of the campaign period (McAllister, 2002). The popularity of the campaign period among political communication scholars is surely also related to the predictable nature of the event. Elections are usually scheduled years, in the worst case months, ahead of time, thus guaranteeing extensive media coverage. But perhaps most importantly campaigns are periods where the main actors involved—politicians, media, citizens—are more active than ever. As Holtz-Bacha (2004) puts it, "Campaigns are times of condensed political communication, where its special features are made visible like light through a prism" (p. 468). We can distinguish three main types of campaign research. Although scholars often try to combine all three (e.g., Just et al., 1996), studies focus on (1) the effects of campaigns on voters, (2) the campaign activities of political actors, or (3) the production of election news. This article can be considered as belonging to this last type. Our discussion of earlier studies will focus on the tone and substantial character of media coverage of U.S. elections. Where possible, we will highlight similarities and differences with European studies.

### ***How Substantial Is U.S. Campaign Coverage?***

In the literature, there is ongoing discussion on the need for and potential decline of so-called hard political news (see Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). In the specific case of U.S. election coverage, the concern is that the news is not enough about issues and public policy. Although there is a broad consensus that substantial issue coverage is necessary for people to act as informed voters, the media's appetite for substantive issues is modest at best. Often, news outlets are argued to be more interested in the horse race (who wins and who loses), strategies that parties use, and (trivial) facts about the candidates. Based on a literature review, Gulati et al. (2004) conclude the following: "Numerous studies have shown that campaign news is overly focused on strategies, tactics, poll results and candidates' prospects for winning rather than on the substantive issues for the campaign" (p. 238). Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) come to a similar conclusion: "Most studies (nine of eleven) found that horse race coverage was the most common topic of newspaper coverage of the presidential campaign" (p. 359). In their own longitudinal study of campaign coverage by *The New York Times*, Benoit and colleagues (2005) come to two important conclusions. First, even in a quality newspaper like *The New York Times*, the overall attention for the horse race and campaign strategy outweighs issue coverage. Coverage of the capacities and characteristics of the main candidates is also slightly more present than discussion of issues and policy. Second, there are no clear trends over time. Based on these data, it is incorrect to think that campaigns were once very substantial, and gradually shifted to the horse race and strategy (see also Aalberg et al., 2012; but see Patterson, 1994). On the contrary, for instance, the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign was one of the most substantial in the postwar history.

The lack of substantive issue coverage is hardly a phenomenon unique to the U.S. media. There is ample proof that in many West European countries as well, horse-race and strategy framing of election news is strongly present in national (e.g., Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2010; Zeh & Hopmann, 2013) and European elections (Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013). However, it is not clear to what extent the presence of these characteristics is comparable with the U.S., as the number of comparative studies is limited and the results somewhat contradictory. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006, 2011) compared election coverage of recent U.S. and Swedish campaigns, both on TV and newspapers, and consistently find that the

U.S. news media focus less on the issues and have a higher share of "game framed" news. Yet the comparison with Sweden is not representative of all European countries.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Esser and D'Angelo (2006) compared television coverage elections in the U.S. (2000), UK (2001), and Germany (2002) and found (perhaps surprisingly) that U.S. election coverage was no less about issues and policy than in the two European countries. They concluded that "the game-minded character of U.S. news culture may be less distinct than previous studies implied. (p. 59). This conclusion seems to be confirmed by a recent large comparative study of nonelection news coverage in 13 European countries, as well as Israel and the United States. In terms of strategy and game framing, the U.S. turned out not to be an outlier but rather "well-placed in-between the European countries in this study" (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2017, p. 47). This finding is in line with a comparative study outside election time that found that U.S. news media did not provide less hard political than news outlets in several European countries (Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, & Aalberg, 2012).

In sum, there is mixed evidence that U.S. journalists give less substantial coverage of their election campaign compared with their European colleagues. Therefore, we do not formulate a concrete hypothesis, but rather the following research question:

*RQ1: To what extent is the coverage of the U.S. election more or less substantial in U.S. newspapers compared with European newspapers?*

### ***How Negative Is Campaign Coverage?***

The negative nature of U.S. election news, and political news in general, has become a truism. The dominance of negative over positive messages is a recurring finding, with much discussion of the damaging consequences for people's trust in politics (Van Aelst, 2017). The titles of some of these studies leave little doubt about their findings: "Good Intentions Make Bad News: Why Americans Hate Campaign Journalism" (Lichter & Noyes, 1996), "The Nightly News Nightmare: Television's Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections" (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007), "Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy" (Fallows, 1996). According to Patterson (1994), the share of negative news coverage in election time has risen from 25% in 1960 to 60% in the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, he notes that "the real bias of the press today is not a partisan one, but a pronounced tendency to report what is wrong with politics and politicians rather than what is right" (Patterson 2000, p. 14). However, the longitudinal study of Benoit et al. (2005) disputes the idea that a general trend over time exists, finding that the higher degree of negative (57%) versus positive (39%) election news is fairly consistent throughout history, with large variation across elections. In 1972, for example, 85% of election coverage of *The New York Times* was negative, whereas in 1984 it was "only" 38%.

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<sup>1</sup> During the 2009 European election, campaign strategy framing was among the lowest in Sweden (Schuck et al., 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Using a slightly different approach, Zaller (1999) finds for the same time period an increase from 5% to 20% negative news.

Traditionally, in European countries, election coverage was found to be less critical and more respectful toward politicians, at least compared with U.S. news. For instance, Hallin and Mancini (1984) noticed that in the beginning of the 1980s, U.S. TV news was much more critical toward political authority compared with Italian TV news, which maintained a more “respectful distance” from its political leaders. Similarly, Semetko and colleagues noticed that British journalists in the 1980s used a more “sacerdotal approach” in their campaign coverage compared with the more skeptical, almost negative view of U.S. journalists (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). However, because of the lack of comparative and longitudinal studies, it is unclear whether these differences still hold today. There is ample proof that more critical and negative coverage has become more prominent in the European press. For instance, Kepplinger (2000) analyzed political reporting in the German press over 45 years (1951–1995) and found that statements about German political elites have become gradually more negative. Reinemann and Wilke (2007) came to similar findings in their longitudinal analysis of the main candidates for chancellorship in the election coverage of the German press. They showed that after an increase in negativity, between 1949 and 1980, a negative tone toward both incumbent and chancellor has become the norm (see also Magin, 2015). Thus, as in the U.S., there seems to be large variation in the tonality of the coverage caused by campaign-specific events. This finding matches the work of Vliegenthart et al. (2010), who found that in the UK and the Netherlands, campaign coverage is in general more critical than noncampaign coverage, although they also found that the context of each campaign leads to large variation in the degree of negativity in the news.

In sum, it seems that a critical, or negative, tone is a standard part of today’s news coverage in European democracies as well as in the U.S. A comparative study of Plasser, Palaver, and Lengauer indicates that the TV coverage of a U.S. election campaign (2004) is hardly more negative in tone than those of Germany (2005), Italy and Austria (2006; cited in Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). An exceptional comparative study of a nonelection period shows that U.S. television and newspaper coverage of politics is not more, but less negative than that of news media in 13 European countries (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, & Berganza, 2017). Yet again, given this mixed evidence, we refrain from formulating a clear hypothesis and ask the following question:

*RQ2: To what extent is the coverage of the U.S. election more or less negative in U.S. newspapers compared with European newspapers?*

### **Research Design**

To empirically address our research questions, we conducted a systematic content analysis of 14 newspapers from seven different countries for both the 2008 and 2016 U.S. presidential elections. When possible, we included one quality and one popular paper per country, although we were somewhat constrained by electronic availability of sources, resulting in the inclusion of only four popular papers. In addition, we also tried to take the political leaning of the newspaper into account. We included one paper situated at the center or the left of the political spectrum and one right (or center) leaning paper, such that for each country we examined two newspapers with at least some ideological distance between them. The newspapers and their classifications are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Selected Newspapers.**

Newspaper	Country	Leaning	Popular	<i>N</i>
<i>The New York Times</i>	United States	Left	No	186
<i>USA Today</i>	United States	Center	Yes	182
<i>de Volkskrant</i>	Netherlands	Left	No	296
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	Netherlands	Right	Yes	206
<i>The Guardian</i>	United Kingdom	Left	No	232
<i>The Sun</i>	United Kingdom	Right	Yes	204
<i>Le Monde</i>	France	Left	No	181
<i>Le Figaro</i>	France	Right	No	168
<i>De Standaard</i>	Belgium (Flanders)	Center	No	216
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	Belgium (Flanders)	Right	Yes	162
<i>El Mundo</i>	Spain	Right	No	202
<i>El Pais</i>	Spain	Left	No	216
<i>Die Welt</i>	Germany	Right	No	175
<i>Die Tageszeitung</i>	Germany	Left	No	171

For each newspaper, from all the articles that contained at least one of the two main candidates' names, we randomly selected a minimum of one article per day for the period between August 24 and November 4, 2008, and between July 13 and November 8, 2016.<sup>3</sup> These time periods start with either the Republican or Democratic convention (whichever came first), thus marking the end of the primary elections and the starting point of the general election campaign. During the periods in which the election coverage was substantially higher, namely, the two weeks during which the party conventions took place as well as in the last one-and-a-half week before Election Day, we selected at least two articles per day for each newspaper. A total of 1,377 articles (for 2008) and 1,420 articles (for 2016) were coded. The *N* per outlet is listed in Table 1.

To analyze the substantial nature of the campaign coverage, we used three separate indicators. First, we coded the main substantial issue that was discussed in the article. At least one full sentence needed to be devoted to a specific issue to be coded. If not, no issue code was attributed. Because we are uninterested in what issues were prominent in the campaign, but rather whether the issue content was present, we recoded this variable into the mere presence or absence of a substantial issue. Second, we coded the presence of strategy framing as well as horse-race framing. Strategy framing was operationalized by the presence of politicians' or parties' strategies for winning elections or issue debates. For horse-race framing, we used two indicators: the presence or absence of polling information and the presence or absence of references to parties and candidates in terms of "winners and losers." Third, we coded the degree to which the article discussed the character (e.g., trustworthiness) and/or capacity (e.g., experience) of the candidates. We distinguished between those articles with a main focus on character/capacity aspects of the candidates versus articles that did not mention (or only occasionally mentioned) these characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> Articles that were in fact not about the election or about one of the two candidates were excluded from further analysis. This happened more often in 2016, in particular because several articles referred in one or two sentences to Donald Trump, but were not about the campaign at all.

To analyze the degree of negativity of the coverage, we used two separate indicators. First, we coded the favorability of the two main candidates in each election campaign. If a candidate was mentioned, coders determined if the article was positive or negative from the perspective of that candidate.

Coders at three different universities were trained extensively by the authors of this study.<sup>4</sup> Articles in foreign languages were coded by native speakers or students with very good knowledge of the specific language. To check intercoder reliability for the 2008 data, 28 English-language articles were double coded. We report percentage-wise agreements and standardized lotus scores, a measure that has been considered especially useful for binary decisions (Fretwurst, 2015). Agreement for the relevant variables was as follows: 95% (standardized lotus = .90) for issue presence, 95% for horse-race framing (standardized lotus = .90), 92% for strategy framing (standardized lotus = .83), 90% for character coding (standardized lotus = .81). For the tone variables, the standardized lotus was .54. For the 2016 data, all coders coded the same 10 English-language articles. Here, intercoder reliability was 86% (standardized lotus = .72) for issue presence, 88% for horserace framing (standardized lotus = .75), 85% for strategy framing (standardized lotus = .71), 86% for character coding (standardized lotus = .73), and the standardized lotus for the tone variables was .68.

We compare the presence (issues and frames) and the mean scores (tone) and test for differences between the United States and the European countries, using *t* tests and chi-squared tests. Additionally, we conduct linear and logistic regression analyses to test for alternative explanations. We include country dummy variables, a dummy variable for the election campaign (2008 or 2016), and a dummy variable to capture the difference between quality and popular newspapers.

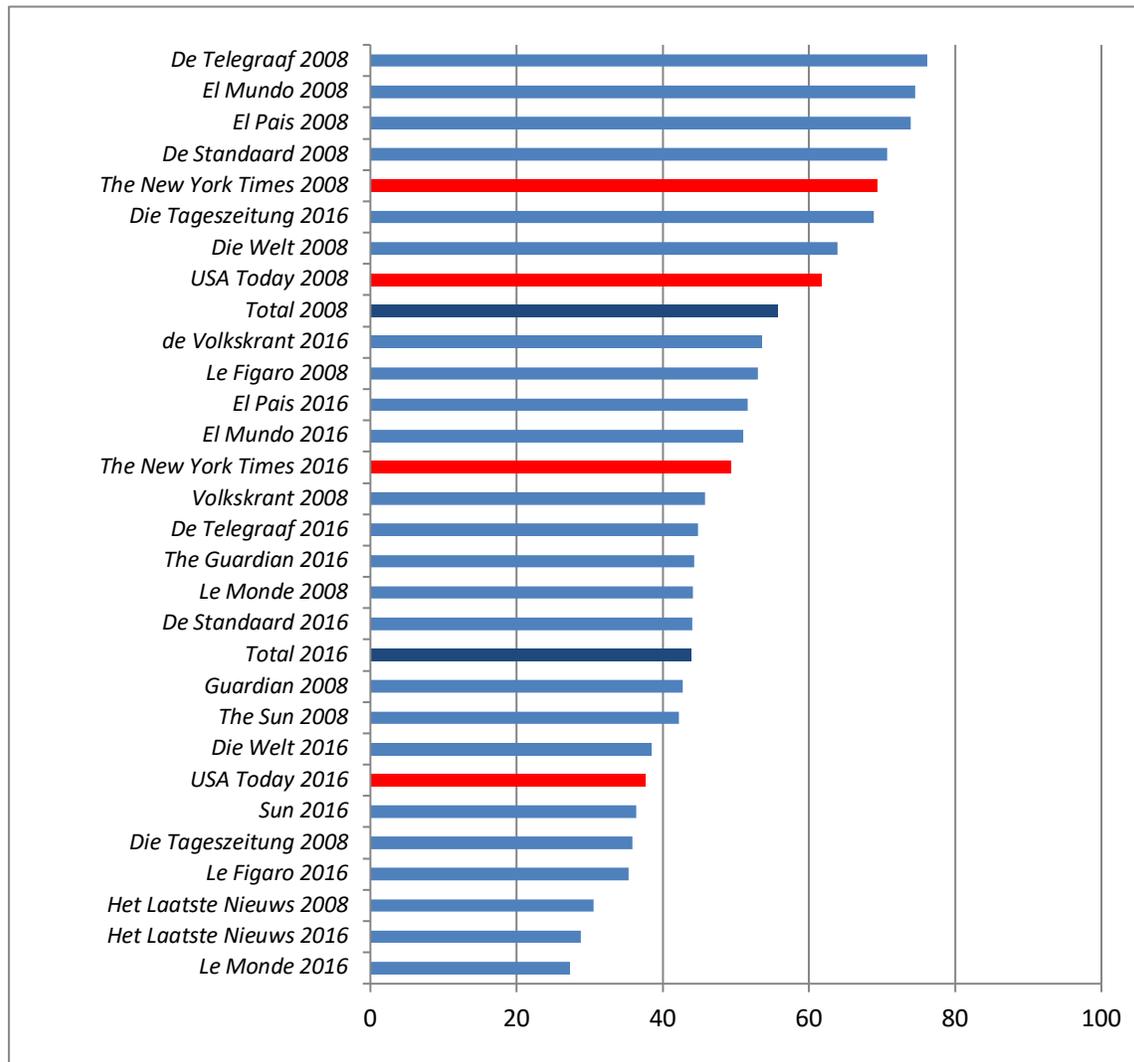
## Results

To what extent are the European newspapers distinct from those in the U.S.? We begin here with an important caveat that each newspaper is a unique entity, making it an oversimplification to generalize about newspapers in any single country or, even more so, to generalize about newspapers in "Europe." Yet our primary goal here is to see whether U.S. newspapers are, in general, significantly different from non-U.S. newspapers (in this case, European newspapers), and so we focus on that line of comparison.

We first look at the substantial nature of the campaign coverage. Figure 1 shows the percentage of articles per newspaper for each campaign that contain at least some substantial issue coverage.

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<sup>4</sup> This analysis was done at the University of Antwerp (Belgium), University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), and University of California (Davis, U.S.). A total of 16 (2008) and seven (2016) coders participated.



**Figure 1. Percentage of articles with issue coverage.**

The figure illustrates a wide variation between the different papers under study. Two observations, however, stand out. First, almost all newspapers present more substantial issue coverage in 2008 compared with 2016. The average scores for all newspapers combined in 2008 was 56%, and this value declined to 44% in 2016, meaning that less than half of the 2016 articles contained some substantial coverage. Second, the U.S. newspapers are positioned squarely between different European newspapers and do not stand out in any way. In both campaigns, *The New York Times* scores slightly above average, while *USA Today* resembles the average of all newspapers. In short, the idea that U.S. newspapers would provide more issue coverage to their readers (who also need to act as voters) finds little support in our data, especially in the case of 2016.

Did the decline of issue coverage from 2008 to 2016 correspond with more strategy and/or horse-race coverage? The answer is simply no: Both strategy and horse-race coverage are lower in 2016 compared with 2008 in most newspapers. Table 2 shows the scores for strategy and horse-race coverage decline in both European and U.S. papers. The U.S. newspapers score in the two campaigns somewhat higher on strategy framing, which can be attributed to *The New York Times*, which is among the top users of this frame. In terms of horse-race coverage, the U.S. papers are again placed among the European papers, with much more variance within European papers than between *The New York Times* and *USA Today*.

**Table 2. Issue, Strategy, and Horse-Race Coverage Across Newspapers and Campaigns (2008 and 2016).**

Newspaper	2008			2016		
	Issue	Strategy	Horse Race	Issue	Strategy	Horse Race
<i>The New York Times</i>	69.3%	50.5%	34.7%	49.4%	43.5%	29.4%
<i>USA Today</i>	61.8%	43.8%	53.9%	37.6%	26.9%	35.5%
<i>de Volkskrant</i>	45.8%	30.7%	28.3%	53.6%	32.1%	35.7%
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	76.2%	31.7%	26.7%	44.8%	26.7%	43.8%
<i>The Guardian</i>	15.7%	44.6%	47.0%	44.3%	45.0%	39.6%
<i>The Sun</i>	42.2%	32.5%	32.5%	36.4%	15.6%	28.9%
<i>Le Monde</i>	44.1%	43.0%	60.2%	27.3%	21.6%	36.4%
<i>Le Figaro</i>	53.0%	56.6%	50.6%	35.3%	24.7%	32.9%
<i>De Standaard</i>	70.7%	36.6%	25.6%	44.0%	32.8%	34.3%
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	30.5%	30.5%	36.6%	28.8%	25.0%	36.3%
<i>El Mundo</i>	74.5%	63.3%	49.0%	51.0%	28.8%	38.5%
<i>El Pais</i>	73.9%	64.1%	53.3%	51.6%	31.5%	33.9%
<i>Die Welt</i>	63.9%	24.7%	38.1%	38.5%	32.1%	55.1%
<i>Die Tageszeitung</i>	35.8%	30.9%	34.6%	68.9%	39.3%	42.2%
Total	54.2%	40.9%	39.7%	43.9%	30.7%	37.0%
U.S. versus EU	$\chi^2 =$ 9.098, $p < .01$	$\chi^2 =$ 3.83, <i>ns</i>	$\chi^2 =$ 1.44, <i>ns</i>	$\chi^2 =$ 0.04, <i>ns</i>	$\chi^2 =$ 1.61, <i>ns</i>	$\chi^2 =$ 1.73, <i>ns</i>

Note.  $N = 1,377$  in 2008 and  $N = 1,420$  in 2016.

The decline of issue coverage did not lead to more strategy or game coverage, but rather to significantly more attention for the character of both candidates. Table 3 shows how in 2008 hardly any articles were mainly devoted to the character of one of two main candidates.

**Table 3. Percentage of Articles With a Strong Focus on Character Across Newspapers and Campaigns (2008 and 2016).**

Newspaper	2008		2016	
	Character Obama	Character McCain	Character Clinton	Character Trump
<i>The New York Times</i>	4.0%	3.0%	7.1%	18.8%
<i>USA Today</i>	1.1%	1.1%	9.7%	26.9%
<i>de Volkskrant</i>	6.1%	5.2%	13.1%	13.1%
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	1.9%	2.0%	8.6%	17.1%
<i>The Guardian</i>	1.2%	0.0%	6.7%	26.8%
<i>The Sun</i>	1.2%	2.4%	5.8%	10.7%
<i>Le Monde</i>	2.1%	5.4%	3.4%	15.9%
<i>Le Figaro</i>	4.8%	3.6%	5.9%	9.4%
<i>De Standaard</i>	2.4%	1.2%	5.2%	17.2%
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	0.0%	3.7%	10.0%	15.0%
<i>El Mundo</i>	3.0%	4.1%	4.8%	17.3%
<i>El Pais</i>	5.4%	4.3%	4.8%	18.5%
<i>Die Welt</i>	12.3%	6.2%	14.1%	20.5%
<i>Die Tageszeitung</i>	2.4%	0.0%	11.1%	22.2%
Total	3.8%	3.3%	7.5%	18.1%
U.S. versus EU	$\chi^2 = 0.79, ns$	$\chi^2 = 0.94, ns$	$\chi^2 = 0.23, ns$	$\chi^2 = 3.34, ns$

Note.  $N = 1,377$  in 2008 and  $N = 1,420$  in 2016.

In 2016, these types of articles were much more present, in particular in the case of Donald Trump (average of 18%). Again, the amount of focus on the character and leadership of the main candidates in the U.S. newspapers is not significantly different from the European press, although *USA Today* stood out as one of the newspapers most focused on the character of Donald Trump (at 27% of coverage), matched only by *The Guardian*.

Next, we move to the tone of the campaign coverage and the levels of negativity toward the main candidates. Figure 2 shows that the overall perception of the U.S. elections is slightly negative, but (considering that the scale runs from  $-2$  to  $+2$ ; see the Appendix) not very outspoken. Most striking is the finding that the 2016 campaign was covered in a more negative way ( $-0.24$ ) than the 2008 campaign ( $-0.05$ ) (both shown in darker bars in Figure 2). This pattern of the 2016 campaign receiving more negative coverage is true for almost every newspaper in our sample. This difference in tone over time is also reflected in the favorability of the coverage toward the main candidates.

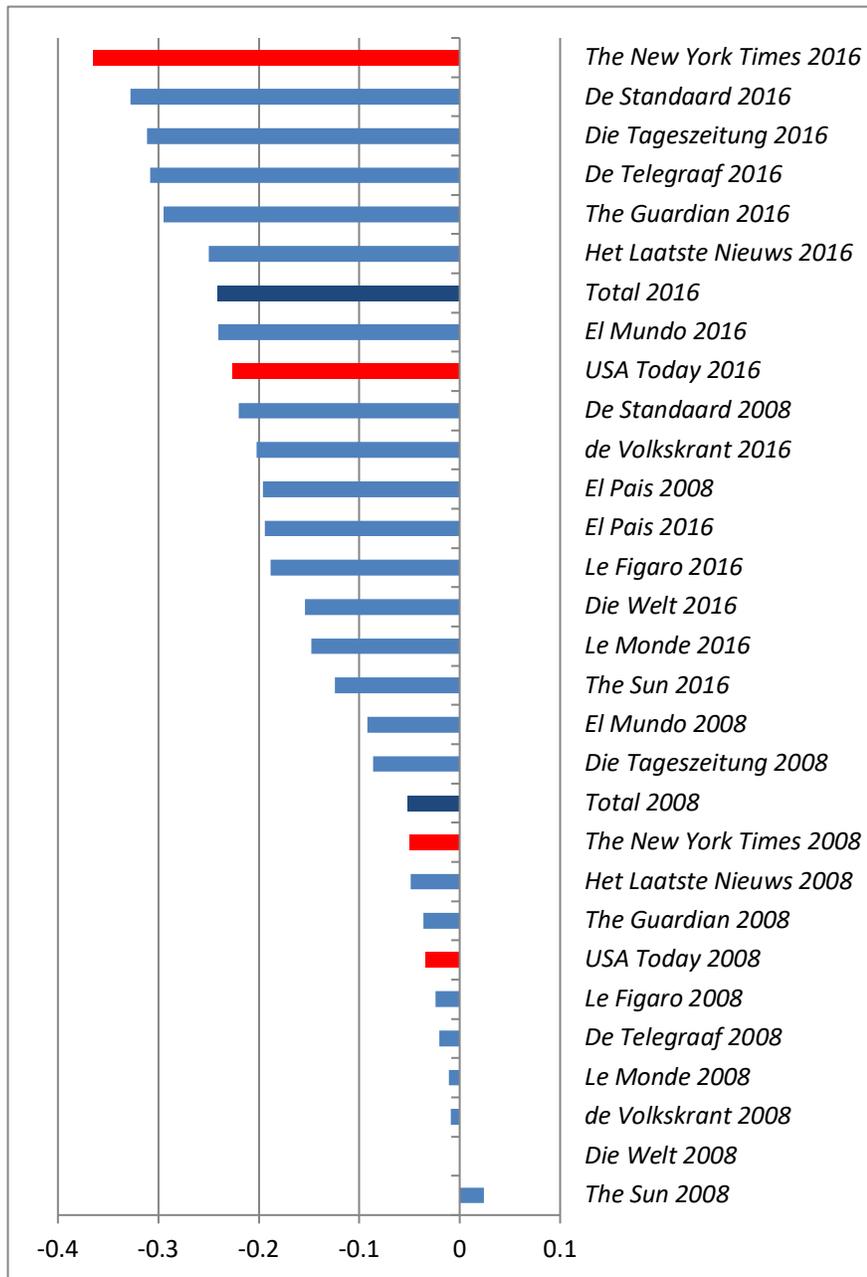


Figure 2. Tone toward campaign in general.

Table 4 shows how the coverage of Barack Obama was much more positive than that of Hillary Clinton eight years later, and, similarly, the coverage of John McCain in 2008 was less negative than that of Donald Trump in 2016. Again, the U.S. newspapers do not stand out in their tone of the campaign in general, nor in their coverage of the main candidates, with the notable (and interesting) exception that in 2008, the tone toward Obama is slightly less positive ( $t = -2.70, p < .05$ ) in U.S. newspapers than in European newspapers.

**Table 4. Comparison of Tone Coverage Across Newspapers (2008 and 2016).**

Newspaper	2008			2016		
	Tone Obama	Tone McCain	Tone campaign	Tone Clinton	Tone Trump	Tone campaign
<i>The New York Times</i>	0.228	-0.327	-0.050	-0.086	-0.843	-0.365
<i>USA Today</i>	0.360	0.022	-0.034	-0.103	-0.516	-0.226
<i>de Volkskrant</i>	0.387	-0.193	-0.009	-0.127	-0.744	-0.202
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	0.594	-0.178	-0.020	0.190	-0.788	-0.308
<i>The Guardian</i>	0.627	-0.458	-0.036	0.014	-0.769	-0.295
<i>The Sun</i>	-0.036	0.000	0.024	-0.036	-1.405	-0.124
<i>Le Monde</i>	0.441	-0.183	-0.011	0.068	-0.726	-0.148
<i>Le Figaro</i>	0.530	-0.108	-0.024	-0.194	-0.924	-0.188
<i>De Standaard</i>	0.476	-0.451	-0.220	-0.093	-0.740	-0.328
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	0.537	-0.207	-0.049	-0.092	-0.539	-0.250
<i>El Mundo</i>	0.480	-0.143	-0.092	0.072	-0.752	-0.240
<i>El Pais</i>	1.011	-0.761	-0.196	-0.018	-0.958	-0.194
<i>Die Welt</i>	0.443	-0.206	0.000	0.016	-0.545	-0.154
<i>Die Tageszeitung</i>	0.420	-0.432	-0.086	-0.449	-0.942	-0.311
Total	0.458	-0.252	-0.052	-0.048	-0.815	-0.241
U.S. versus EU	$t = 2.70,$ $p < .01$	$t =$ $-1.44, ns$	$t =$ $-.31, ns$	$t =$ $.64, ns$	$t =$ $-1.94, ns$	$t =$ $1.15, ns$

Note.  $N = 1,377$  in 2008 and  $N = 1,420$  in 2016.

To what extent can we explain the difference in coverage between the newspapers under study? Tables 5 and 6 demonstrate the extent to which the presence of a certain content characteristic in an article can be explained by (1) the campaign under study (2008 or 2016), (2) the country in which the newspaper is published, and (3) the type of newspaper (quality or popular newspaper; left-leaning or center/right-leaning paper). We report odds ratios from logistic regressions (Table 5) and unstandardized regression coefficients from OLS regressions (Table 6).

**Table 5. Explaining Differences in Issue and Frame Presence  
(Logistic Regression, Odds Ratio).**

	Issue	Strategy	Horse Race	Character Democrat	Character Republican
2016	0.634***	0.620***	0.876	2.285***	6.619***
<i>Country</i>					
Netherlands	0.871	0.554***	0.770	1.417	0.771
Belgium	0.544***	0.666*	0.826	0.629	0.753
Germany	0.738	0.526***	1.246	1.569	0.928
UK	0.597***	0.781	0.953	0.708	0.827
France	0.436***	0.657**	1.414*	0.573	0.607
Spain	1.105	0.985	1.289	0.631	0.804
<i>Quality newspaper</i>	1.560**	1.563***	0.889	1.249	1.130
<i>Left newspaper</i>	0.731**	1.031	1.015	0.759	1.137
Constant	1.442**	0.689**	0.697**	0.033***	0.036***
Pseudo $R^2$	0.030	0.024	0.008	0.035	0.095

Note. Country reference category is U.S.  $N = 2,797$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

To start with the campaign period, for all but one of the content characteristics (horse-race framing), the year of the campaign mattered significantly: There was less issue coverage and less strategy framing in the 2016 campaign compared with 2008 (odds ratios smaller than 1), while both the coverage about the candidates and the campaign was more negative in 2016 than in 2008. Rather than there being a trend of increasing negativity in news coverage, we believe this finding reflects the enthusiasm and excitement about Obama and his campaign that existed in 2008 and the outspoken negative feelings about the 2016 candidates and their much-criticized campaigns. We will elaborate on this interpretation in the final part of our study. The character of the two candidates played a much larger role in 2016, with the odds that an article discussing the Republican's character being more than 6 times higher compared with 2008 (and for Democrats, more than 3 times higher).

**Table 6. Explaining Differences in Tone (Logistic Regression).**

	Tone Democrats		Tone Republicans		Tone campaign	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Year</i>						
2016	-0.509***	0.038	-0.547***	0.038	-0.188***	0.022
<i>Country</i>						
Netherlands	0.145*	0.068	-0.048	0.067	0.042	0.039
Belgium	0.126	0.078	-0.143	0.078	-0.052	0.045
Germany	0.042	0.082	-0.142	0.080	0.051	0.046
UK	0.068	0.071	-0.249***	0.070	0.052	0.040
France	0.140	0.081	-0.086	0.080	0.976*	0.046
Spain	0.303***	0.077	-0.253**	0.077	0.017	0.044
<i>Quality newspaper</i>	-0.043	0.064	0.049	0.063	-0.048	0.036
<i>Left newspaper</i>	0.030	0.053	-0.143**	0.052	-0.013	0.030
Constant	0.355***	0.060	-0.098	0.060	-0.041	0.035
Adjusted $R^2$	0.068		0.084		0.030	

Note. Country reference category is U.S.  $N = 2,797$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Differences across countries' coverage of both elections exist, but are not very systematic. In line with the descriptive results presented earlier, substantial issue coverage was significantly higher in the U.S. compared with some other countries (Belgium, UK, and France), but did not differ from the coverage in three other countries (Germany, Spain, Netherlands). Strategy framing in the U.S. papers was higher compared with all countries except Belgium and Spain. In terms of horse-race coverage, there are hardly any country differences, with only slightly higher levels of horse-race framing in France. In terms of the attention for the character and leadership of the main candidates, there are simply no significant country differences at all. Also related to the tone of the campaign and candidates, we find little country variation (Table 6). The Dutch and Spanish newspapers were the most positive about the Democratic candidates, while the British newspapers were most negative about the Republicans, scoring 0.25 lower on the  $-2$  to  $+2$  scale than their U.S. counterparts.

Finally, we look at the systematic differences between the types of newspapers, with two main findings. First, the differences between popular and quality newspapers are limited, with only significant differences on two aspects: quality newspapers focus more on issue coverage and on strategy coverage. This finding confirms that issue coverage and strategy coverage are not mutually exclusive. In particular, quality newspapers provide articles that combine coverage that explains the motives and actions behind the campaigns with substantial issue coverage. For all other variables there were no significant differences between popular and quality papers. Second, we also investigated whether the leaning of the paper had an effect on the coverage. Again, we only find significant differences on two variables: left-leaning papers, first, provide slightly less substantial coverage and, second, are more negative about the Republican candidates. The first result is hard to explain, in particular as these papers do not provide more strategy coverage or focus more on the character of the candidates. The second difference is more in line with the idea that a left-leaning outlet is more critical toward a right-leaning political party. Overall, the differences are substantially small, and the models do not explain high levels of variance in the presence of those characteristics at the article level, with (pseudo)  $R^2$  ranging from close to zero to 0.09.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on two central features of election campaign coverage: their substantial character and tone. We devoted special attention to the differences between the U.S. press and newspapers in six Western European countries in covering a specific type of event, the U.S. election campaigns of 2008 and 2016. Overall, our findings are in line with previous studies in showing that substantial issue coverage is relatively low, and a negative view of the main candidates, and of the campaign in general, is more common than a positive one.

Our key finding is that although there is wide variation between the 14 newspapers and seven countries under study, structural differences between the U.S. press and "the" European press are almost absent. In terms of the substantial nature of the coverage, the U.S. newspapers scored slightly better, normatively speaking, than most European newspapers in 2008, but in 2016 there were no significant differences at all. Also related to the tone of coverage, the U.S. papers do not stand out compared with the European newspapers. On both continents, the overall tone toward the U.S. campaigns is slightly negative. In terms of specific candidates, there were, again, few differences, with only the European press covering

Obama slightly more positively in 2008. This small variation between European newspapers and U.S. newspapers might reflect public opinion in European countries, which is, in general, more in line with a Democratic president (Wike, Stokes, Poushter, & Fetterolfpew, 2017).

In sum, the findings of this study are in line with the idea of global media convergence and with recent comparative studies (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017) showing that traditional U.S. news media such as *USA Today* and *The New York Times* are not outliers but rather well placed in between the European newspapers. Our study shows that by far the biggest predictor of the nature of newspaper coverage of the U.S. elections was not the country or newspaper producing the coverage but, instead, the year of the election; in general, newspaper coverage differed much more from 2008 to 2016 than from one country (or continent) to the next.

### **Theoretical Explanations and Hypotheses for Future Work**

How can this lack of systematic variation between U.S. and European coverage of the U.S. elections be explained? We argue there are two main explanations. The first is the simple but powerful role of news routines and news values, common to American and European news outlets alike, on how to cover political events. Journalists in Western democracies work according to a similar media logic driven by “a transnational news-value culture” and a shared idea on what is newsworthy (O’Neill & Harcup, 2009; Swanson, 2004, p. 57). Our literature overview of campaign studies suggests that, over time, the coverage of European news media started to resemble that of their U.S. colleagues. The news media became more politically autonomous, and commercial pressures increased. This process has been labeled among others as “globalization,” “homogenization,” or, more controversially, as “Americanization” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Our study, containing only two points in time, does not allow us to confirm a trend over time but can still be seen as evidence of the presence of media convergence. That does not mean that all media reports have become identical, as the strong variation within and between countries illustrates. Rather, our study suggests that we cannot clearly distinguish a U.S. style that is distinct from how media in Western Europe cover a campaign. The absence of a distinct U.S. campaign style might be further strengthened by the intermedia agenda-setting role of the U.S. press, as most foreign correspondents rely heavily on traditional U.S. quality news outlets as sources of inspiration (Willnat & Weaver, 2003). As part of another project, we interviewed eight foreign correspondents from different European countries that covered the U.S. 2016 election.<sup>5</sup> They all indicate that their day starts with reading a newspaper like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, thereby possibly unintentionally, contributing to a common understanding of what is at stake in the campaign. Furthermore, European journalists do not cover the U.S. election campaign from a “domestic” point of view. We find that, on average, only one article in 10 in the European newspapers makes a clear link to the home country (not presented in the results). This finding indicates that the U.S. election campaign is seen as an internationally newsworthy event, thus increasing the chance that the coverage will be similar to that of the home country. In short, we found no evidence to support the idea that U.S. newspapers had stronger incentives than newspapers in Europe to provide substantial information to their readers.

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<sup>5</sup> More concretely, we interviewed U.S. correspondents from Belgium (3), The Netherlands (2), UK (1), Germany (1), Sweden (1). See also Boydston and Van Aelst (2018).

Second, we believe that the similarities in coverage are explained by campaign dynamics. For almost all the indicators used in this study, there was a significant difference between the two campaigns, whereas country variation and newspaper characteristics proved less relevant. In sum, the 2008 coverage was more about (economic) issues and less about character than the 2016 coverage. The 2016 campaign coverage also turned out to be more negative. As scholars, we are often tempted to interpret such findings as a potential trend, or at least as systematic over-time variation. Previous longitudinal studies (e.g., Benoit et al., 2005), however, stress the lack of trends across campaigns, pointing instead to the specific nature of each campaign. The campaign in 2008 was characterized by an unfolding economic crisis and a young African American politician that seemed to inspire young American voters and people across the globe. In 2016, journalists were forced to devote more attention to the atypical figure of Donald Trump, a political outsider whose campaign led to enthusiastic, but also hostile, reactions. It seems that the very specific contexts of the 2008 and 2016 elections, but in very different ways, determined the behavior of journalists across the board. Only the focus on the horse race and opinion polls seem to be a rather stable characteristic of campaign coverage across time and campaign.

Of course, more research on more election campaigns is needed to examine the two mechanisms we have argued are behind our findings: first, that journalists across media systems have basically the same news values in covering an election, whether at home or internationally; and second, that most of the variance in news coverage of an election campaign can be explained by how news values map onto the dynamics of that particular campaign. Future research should test these purported mechanisms more directly than our data allow. Concretely, for example, to test the hypothesis that journalists from different countries abide by the same campaign dynamics, future studies could perform a fine-grained analysis of the timing of stories by different countries' newspapers on different events throughout a debate, using error correction models to test the hypothesis that key events systematically predict the volume, tone, and type of news coverage to the campaign, regardless of country (e.g., Johnson & Socker, 2012). We hope this comparative content study will motivate future work along these lines.

We are well aware that our conclusions should be read with caution and nuance. The variation between U.S. and European media might be more apparent if we were to look also at television news. In particular, networks like CNN and Fox News are often absent in many European countries, where public broadcasters still play a dominant role. We also ignored the many online media platforms that provide alternative and often very partisan news (Vargo & Guo, 2016). Including these new media might have provided a more nuanced conclusion related to the idea of media convergence.

Additionally, our relatively small sample of newspapers and articles might influence the findings for some countries and outlets. For instance, the differences between the countries under study are not always easily interpreted. This might be partly because we only analyzed two newspapers per country. Furthermore, the enormous attention to the U.S. election meant that we could only investigate a part of the coverage, which might influence the findings. It is important to note, however, that the significant differences we found are mostly limited in substantial terms. Despite the limitations of our study, we are convinced that this type of research, examining news coverage of a single event across journalists in different countries, is a promising way to improve our understanding of how political news media work in a comparative perspective.

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