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Please cite the final published version:

Green-Pedersen, C., Mortensen, P. B., & Thesen, G. (2017). The Incumbency Bonus Revisited: Causes and Consequences of Media Dominance. *British Journal of Political Science*, 47(1), 131-148. DOI: [10.1017/S0007123415000022](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000022)

## Publication metadata

<b>Title:</b>	<i>The Incumbency Bonus Revisited: Causes and Consequences of Media Dominance</i>
<b>Author(s):</b>	<i>Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Peter B. Mortensen and Gunnar Thesen</i>
<b>Journal:</b>	<i>British Journal of Political Science</i>
<b>DOI/Link:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000022">10.1017/S0007123415000022</a>
<b>Document version:</b>	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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# The Incumbency Bonus Revisited

## Causes and Consequences of Media Dominance

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Forthcoming in British Journal of Political Science

Getting in the news is a central concern for politicians, and studying which politicians are prominent in the media has become an important task for the study of democratic politics.<sup>1</sup> A central finding in this literature is the so-called “incumbency bonus”, meaning that the incumbent party or government leader gets more media coverage than the opposition or opposition leader.<sup>2</sup> Potentially, this finding indicates that modern mass media reinforce formal political power by paying disproportionate attention to those who hold office. However, to assess the democratic implications of the incumbency bonus, we need to know more about its causes and consequences.

The existing literature typically explains the dominance of incumbents in the news by reference to the importance of news values such as elite status and prominence.<sup>3</sup> This “reflection of power” explanation seems a plausible account of why incumbents generally appear in the news more often than their challengers. Yet, it is an explanation that reduces political journalism to reproducing the political power structure, thereby discounting the role of journalistic norms such as political balance<sup>4</sup> and the “watch dog role of the media”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it does not sufficiently address the fact that the size of the bonus varies considerably.

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the 2013 meeting of the CES in Amsterdam, the ECPR 2013 General Conference in Bordeaux, and the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Danish Political Science Association in Vejle. Thanks to our discussants and other attendants for their very helpful feedback. Also thanks to Stefaan Walgrave and Rune Slothuus for their constructive criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Semetko 1996; Brants and van Praag 2006; Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011; Schoenbach, de Ridder, and Lauf 2001; de Swert 2011; van Aelst and de Swert 2009; van Dalen 2011; Asp 2006; Schulz and Zeh 2006.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011; van Dalen 2011; Schoenbach, Ridder, and Lauf 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Hopmann, van Aelst, and Legnante 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett 2003; Zaller 2003.

To improve our understanding of the incumbency bonus, this paper develops and tests an explanation of how journalists weight partly conflicting norms against each other when covering political actors. This explanation not only accounts for the incumbency bonus but also allows us to predict *variation* in it. The point of departure is that the functioning of modern journalism is based on two important norms. One norm is that modern media should serve as a “watch dog” focusing on societal problems and on what should be done about them.<sup>6</sup> This produces an emphasis on incumbent actors as they hold policy responsibility. The other norm is that of objective and impartial journalism,<sup>7</sup> which implies that both sides of a political conflict should receive attention.

The relative importance of these norms depends on the political context. For instance, the context of elections is expected to decrease the incumbency bonus. During election campaigns, the key question is who will win and a balanced coverage of the electoral contest implies attention to both incumbents and challengers. In between elections, the media are more focused on detecting and attributing responsibility for societal problems, making critical coverage of incumbents a dominating feature of political news. Similarly, the political context changes with the level of attention that a given issue receives. Typically, increases in issue attention are accompanied by intensified political conflicts. When this happens, opposition parties become more newsworthy, and the incumbency bonus declines.

The implications of the theoretical argument are examined in a large N analysis of media coverage of Danish politics over a 20-year period (1984-2003). The dataset contains more than 30,000 daily radio news features, and each feature has been coded in terms of policy issue (i.e.,

<sup>6</sup> Boydston 2013, 58-77; Bennett 2003; Zaller 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Hopmann, van Aelst, and Legnante 2012.

whether it concerns health, environment, etc.) and prominence of political actors (i.e., whether the news feature includes a statement from a political actor). The dataset is unique in terms of the long time period covered with daily observations.

Furthermore, Denmark is a typical example of Hallin and Mancini's democratic corporatist media system with a central role of public broadcasting.<sup>8</sup> Studying public broadcasting in the context of a democratic corporatist media system thus makes the findings generalizable to at least central and northern Europe. In addition, while most previous studies of the incumbency bonus have been based on election campaigns,<sup>9</sup> we systematically compare the media coverage of political actors in election times and non-election times.

Our theorizing about the causes of the incumbency bonus challenges implicit perceptions about its consequences. Rather than assuming that media dominance reflects and reinforces political power, we stress that the media prominence of incumbents are inextricably linked to bad news and the burden of being held responsible for all kinds of societal problems. To validate this claim, we supplement the media prominence code with a content coding of a subsample of the radio news in order to investigate the tone of the news (good, neutral, bad) and the presence of blame attributions directed at the government.

According to the above argument, media coverage is an important liability of policy responsibility. Consequently, the more the incumbents appear in the media, the worse they should perform in opinion polls. To examine this claim empirically, we conclude the analysis with a Granger causality-inspired analysis of the relationship between media prominence and standing in

<sup>8</sup> Hallin and Mancini 2004, 143-197.

<sup>9</sup> For an exception, see van Aelst and de Swert 2009.

opinion polls. Consistent with our argument, we find that for the government parties, more media prominence is in fact followed by lower opinion ratings, whereas media prominence does not hurt the electoral support of the opposition.

#### THE INCUMBENCY BONUS AND THE “REFLECTION OF POWER ARGUMENT”

Existing research on the media prominence of politicians in a number of different national contexts have shown that government parties/prime ministers experience more media coverage than the opposition and its leaders.<sup>10</sup> The dominant explanation of this incumbency bonus draws on news value theory. A set of values exists among journalists, which specifies several properties of an event that increase its “newsworthiness”.<sup>11</sup> The presence of conflict is one such value. Other values are relevance and elite status, which make news media focus on formal political power. Incumbents are capable of affecting nearly all aspects of society through their decisions, and this increases their relevance as objects of news coverage. This “reflection of power” argument has not only been used to explain the incumbency bonus.<sup>12</sup> It has also been applied to show that the news coverage of MPs is “power dependent”<sup>13</sup> and to explain variation in media coverage of MPs across five countries.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Semetko 1996; Brants and van Praag 2006; Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011; Schoenbach, de Ridder, and Lauf 2001; de Swert 2011; van Aelst and de Swert 2009; van Dalen 2011; Asp 2006; Schulz and Zeh 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Harcup and O’Neil 2001; Shoemaker 2006.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011; de Swert and Walgrave 2002; Schoenbach, de Ridder, and Lauf 2001; van Dalen 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Tresch 2009.

<sup>14</sup> van Aelst, Shehata, and van Dalen 2010.

As an explanation of the incumbency bonus, it is very plausible. Nevertheless, it also presents a rather broad and vague perspective on which political actors are prominent in the news, a perspective that portrays the media in a somewhat passive way. Can journalism simply be reduced to re-producing the political power structure, and how does this fit with the norm of objectivity and political balance<sup>15</sup> or the “watch dog role of the media? Furthermore, this explanation does not account for variation in the size of the incumbency bonus. Schoenbach, for instance, only finds an incumbency bonus in Germany and not in the Netherlands,<sup>16</sup> and van Dalen points to cross-national variation depending on power relations in the political system and journalistic culture.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Van Aelst and de Swert find a lower incumbency bonus during election times compared to “normal” times.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the application of news value theory in the literature needs to be supplemented with a more explicit explanation of how journalists, in different political contexts, weight partly conflicting norms against each other. The next section sketches the building blocks for such a theoretical contribution.

### *The role of journalistic norms and political context*

As argued by both Wolfsfeld and Boydston, understanding the production of political news requires theories that take into account the interaction between the political context and the functioning of modern mass media.<sup>19</sup> A first step is to recognize that professional journalistic norms

<sup>15</sup> Hopmann, van Aelst and Legnante 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Schoenbach 2001.

<sup>17</sup> van Dalen 2011.

<sup>18</sup> van Aelst and de Swert 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfsfeld 1997, 2-5; Boydston 2013, 23-45.

may sometimes contradict each other when it comes to coverage of political actors. On the one hand, the Western tradition of neutral informational journalism<sup>20</sup> covers the idea of the media as watch dog.<sup>21</sup> Empirical studies indicate that such a norm affects news coverage, finding, for instance, that the media have a clear negativity bias focusing disproportionately on societal problems or failures.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the news value of elite status clearly implies *responsibility* as political actors are considered important to the extent that they can be blamed for societal problems. Hence, the watch dog norm makes actors in office more newsworthy, but at the same time the media actively challenge and not only reflect political power.

Another central norm is that of political balance. Modern news media should present a “neutral” and balanced picture of reality, avoiding political biases that could question the media’s independence from political power. Exactly what political balance implies is debated.<sup>23</sup> However, one clear implication is that the media should cover opposition as well as government, as the relevance of political actors is gauged from the perspective of political conflicts more than from the perspective of societal problems.

The next step, then, is to consider how different aspects of political context affect the application of the two norms, thereby influencing who appears in the news. Our point of departure is that the watch dog norm together with news values that encourage “reflection of power” generate a focus on the incumbent in media coverage of political actors. Political news is dominated by societal problems, and the news comes to both reflect and challenge political power when covering

<sup>20</sup> Hallin and Mancini 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Boydston 2013, 58-77; Bennett 2003; Zaller 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Soroka 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Hopmann, van Aelst, and Legnante 2012.



these problems. The expected outcome in terms of media prominence is spelled out in our baseline hypothesis:

*H1: Incumbents get more media coverage than the opposition.*

This hypothesis is perfectly in line with the results of the existing literature. However, we are looking to expand this finding through explaining variation in the media prominence of incumbents. First, we look at the difference between non-election and election times. Outside election campaigns, the political dynamic centers on the many societal problems that surface in news coverage. The opposition will often use news stories about societal problems to attack the government. Being outside office, the opposition can react to the news stories that it finds particularly attractive, for instance, news that directly questions government competence or news that attract a great deal of attention.<sup>24</sup> Governments find themselves in a much less flexible situation. When the media or political opponents raise questions about societal problems, the government has to respond whether or not it actually has a chance to do something about the problems.

During election campaigns, the political contexts change. Part of a campaign is of course about how the government has performed, which still leads to an incumbency focus. However, an electoral campaign also revolves around what the future government will do, as incumbents and challengers debate which issues need to be addressed and which solutions need to be applied. This means that the media will focus on the different contenders' platforms and ideas.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, elections are contests, and during these contests, the norm of objectivity demands

<sup>24</sup> Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Seeberg 2013; Thesen 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. van Aelst and de Swert 2009.

more balance between the media visibility of incumbents and challengers. Overall, during campaigns, political actors are considered in light of their role in party competition and less in light of policy responsibility. The implication of this argument is summarized in the following hypothesis:

*H2: The incumbency bonus is lower in election times than in non-election times.*

Pushing this argument further, the nature and level of conflict between government and opposition not only differs between election and non-election times. In between elections, different policy issues attract varying amounts of political attention. As argued above, the incumbency bonus is partly the result of the greater flexibility of the opposition, who can choose not to react to news stories if they find no interest in competing on them.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, incumbents are obliged to respond as they hold policy responsibility regardless of issue saliency. In contrast, when attention to an issue is high in the media, opposition parties have an incentive to join the media debate, otherwise being unable to communicate their engagement and positions on salient issues.

From the perspective of journalists, issues that deal with government actors will be considered newsworthy even when they lack the conflict between political competitors that could sustain further coverage. However, when issues become politically salient, conflict and party competition supplement elite status and power as key news values. Consequently, the norm of balance increases its relevance in news coverage, in the same way it does during election campaigns. Overall, then, the size of the incumbency bonus is expected to vary with the degree of attention to issues in the media:

<sup>26</sup>

Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Thesen 2013.

*H3: The incumbency bonus is greater when issues attract little media attention than when issues are subject to intensive media coverage.*

The argument behind a general incumbency bonus is that the power of incumbents creates dominance in media coverage through their policy relevance. Therefore, the incumbency bonus should vary according to government strength. A majority government, not depending on the support of opposition parties to pass legislation, should produce the highest incumbency bonus.<sup>27</sup> Minority governments that need to negotiate support with one or several opposition parties will, on the other hand, share a part of the incumbency bonus with the parties supporting the government. This implies that the news pick up on the details of how policy responsibility is shared in a political system. Concentration of power makes it easier to identify and communicate who is responsible.<sup>28</sup> The implication of these mechanisms is summarized in the following hypothesis:

*H4: The media prominence of incumbents increases with the government's parliamentary strength.*

Finally, the argument on the causes of variation in the incumbency bonus has implications for its effect on electoral support. The existing literature has also paid attention to support in opinion polls, but from the opposite perspective. Hopmann et al.'s study of Danish election campaigns found that the stronger the incumbent stands in the polls, the higher is the incumbency bonus.<sup>29</sup> This is a logical consequence of mass media focus on who will form the next government.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. van Dalen 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Pierson 1994, 32-36.

<sup>29</sup> Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011.

Outside election campaigns, however, a reverse relationship should be expected. Most of the time, the next election is far away, making it unlikely that changes in poll standings have substantial effects on the balance in media coverage of incumbents and challengers. Instead, incumbent coverage is characterized by societal problems, negativity and blame, which, in the aggregate, will damage their electoral support. In other words, we question the assumption behind the concept of an incumbency “bonus”, that is, that incumbents profit from a higher media prominence. Rather, if it is correct that the dominance of incumbents in the media reflects the burden of being in government, then media prominence should be an electoral liability. This would also shed light on the well documented but underexplored “cost of ruling” finding in the voting literature, which means that over time governments tend to lose electoral support.<sup>30</sup> The implication of this argument is summarized in our final hypothesis:

*H5: Outside election campaigns, incumbent support in opinion polls decreases with increases in media prominence.*

## DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Investigating the hypotheses derived above is challenging. It requires a media dataset that covers several electoral cycles, a broad range of policy issues and both strong and weak governments. Further, to assess the causal relationship between media prominence and electoral support, we not only need a long time series, but also observations with a high frequency. As argued in the following, a database on the Danish radio news in the period 1984-2003 meets these requirements quite closely.

<sup>30</sup>

E.g., Paldam and Skott 1995.

The radio news was produced by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), which enjoyed a de-facto monopoly on broadcasting radio news nationally in this period. Studies of the Danish media system indicate that many stories originated in the major national newspapers but that the hourly radio news was the most important filter for stories raised in the newspapers to make it into the TV news in the evening. Radio news thereby constitutes the best single source for measuring the agenda of the mass media in general in Denmark.<sup>31</sup>

All news features in the long versions of the radio news broadcasted at noon and 6.30 PM were coded. The dataset, which contains more than 190,000 news features, provides a unique opportunity to study media prominence of political actors over a long time period and in different political contexts. Van Dalen argues that Denmark should exhibit a relatively weak government dominance because of its consensus-based political system and pragmatic journalistic culture.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in terms of identifying the basic incumbency bonus, the Danish case does not constitute a particularly likely case. Furthermore, the fact that Denmark is dominated by minority governments with different levels of parliamentary support makes it a well-suited case in which to examine how changes in government strength affect the incumbency bonus (H4).<sup>33</sup>

Each news feature was coded with regard to both issue content and political actors. The issue content coding was conducted using a modified version of the Danish policy agendas coding

<sup>31</sup> Probably because of the limited tradition for “self-made” stories, the Danish radio news have never been subject to any regulation of their coverage during election times, such as requiring a certain balance in their coverage. They also have no reputation for having a particular political color.

<sup>32</sup> van Dalen 2011, 39.

<sup>33</sup> van Dalen 2011 discusses the relative strength of government and parliament. In the Danish context, this distinction is similar to the one between government and opposition, see below.

scheme (see [www.agendasetting.dk](http://www.agendasetting.dk)). The coding scheme for media coding contains 59 topic codes, which we have then reduced to 27 policy issues such as crime, traffic, health, education, defence, and so on. With respect to political actors in the media, we have coded what Ferree et al. label actor, standing, not just visibility.<sup>34</sup> Thus, political actors were only coded when they actually expressed a statement or when their statements were presented. This means that when an actor is just mentioned, for instance, criticized, the actor is not coded. Furthermore, the data measures *prominence*, that is, number of appearances, not just whether an actor is present in the news.<sup>35</sup> The coding allowed for including multiple actors, such as groups of parties jointly presenting a statement.<sup>36</sup> To test our hypotheses, we need to focus on the radio news features that actually deal with political news in Denmark. This is to avoid the dataset being full of observations that are irrelevant to the research question of the paper. Consequently, we exclude the large number of news features (approx. 70,000) that reports political news from abroad with no direct relation to Danish politics. This could, for instance, be a civil war somewhere or a US presidential election. Second, our argument applies to *political* news, which we have proxied by selecting only the news features about Denmark in which a political actor actually appeared. The final dataset then contains 31,003 news features.

<sup>34</sup> Ferree et al. 2002, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Tresch 2009, 74-75.

<sup>36</sup> Other actors than parties, such as interest groups, experts and public organizations were also coded, but these are not included in this study. Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2007) contains the details of the coding.

### *Measuring the incumbency bonus*

The first step in measuring the dependent variable, the incumbency bonus, is to operationalize the notion of opposition and government in the context of the Danish multiparty system. Danish politics is organized around a bloc of left-wing and a bloc of right-wing parties. The left-wing bloc consists of the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party and more extreme left-wing parties. Typically, the Social Liberals have also supported the left-wing bloc, although in certain periods, it supported the right-wing bloc. The latter was the case, for instance, during the center-right government from 1982 to 1993. The right-wing bloc consists of the Liberals and the Conservatives and more radical right-wing parties. The two small center parties, Centre Democrats and Christian People's Party, have typically also supported the right-wing bloc. The Danish tradition for minority governments implies that not all parties from a bloc actually take part in the government. However, all parties clearly belong to a bloc when it comes to the question of government formation, and even the center parties that have sometimes changed bloc always indicate before an election which bloc they will support.<sup>37</sup>

In the following, we mainly compare the media prominence of the incumbent parties with the parties who constitute the most likely alternative government.<sup>38</sup> However, we also try out an alternative operationalization in which government support parties (the government's parliamentary basis) also count as incumbents and in which the entire bloc of opposition parties is

<sup>37</sup> Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Which parties would have formed an alternative government is of course not completely certain. However, the parties have always made it clear in advance of an election whether they had ambitions of joining a government or not. Thus, in practice this is rather straightforward to determine.

included in the comparison group.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that there is no strong separation between executive and legislative power in the Danish context. This implies that the government parties are mainly prominent in the media as ministers. MPs from the government parties are normally very loyal to the cabinet and hardly ever ask critical questions in parliament to the ministers. Danish politics is a struggle between ministers and the opposition parties.

To determine the incumbency bonus, we first calculated the media prominence of both incumbent and opposition actors.<sup>40</sup> If, for instance, the incumbents have a score of 75 percent, this means that a minimum of one government actor is present in 3 out of 4 news features on a given issue topic in a given week. The incumbency bonus was then calculated by simply subtracting the media prominence of opposition actors from the prominence of government actors.

Table 1 provides an overview of the incumbency bonus for each Danish government in the period. In line with Hypothesis 1, the table documents a clear media dominance of incumbent actors for all cabinets. However, it also provides support for the general contention of this paper, namely that the size of the bonus varies. Note that the two different measures of the incumbency bonus turn out to produce very similar results. In the rest of the paper, we use the first operationalization, which compares the parties in government with the government alternative as this is the most conventional definition of incumbency.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix 1 provides an overview of Danish governments and the categorization of the different Danish parties.

<sup>40</sup> A government actor can either be the government in general (for instance, “the government proposes to do so and so”), a minister, or an MP/ MEP from the governing party. Most government actors that appear in the media (79 %) belong to the first two categories (see also below).



*Table 1. The incumbency bonus across governments, 1984-2003.*

Government	From	Incumbency bonus	Alternative operationalization	N
Schlüter I	01.01.1984 (10.09.1982)	41.3 %	42.7 %	6454
Schlüter II	10.09.1987	36.3 %	37.0 %	1315
Schlüter III	03.06.1988	45.9 %	47.7 %	4232
Schlüter IV	18.12.1990	34.6 %	41.3 %	3662
Nyrup I	25.01.1993	52.3 %	55.1 %	2968
Nyrup II	27.09.1994	53.1 %	55.9 %	3384
Nyrup III	30.12.1996	46.6 %	54.2 %	1838
Nyrup IV	23.03.1998	44.9 %	52.6 %	4631
Fogh I	27.11.2001	47.4 %	47.3 %	2519
Total		44.6 %	48.1 %	31003

Note: Incumbency bonus measured as the difference between media prominence of governing parties and the alternative government. The alternative operationalization measures the bonus as the difference between the media prominence of the governing bloc (governing and support parties) and opposition bloc (alternative government and alternative government support parties).

### *Modeling approach and measures of explanatory variables*

The ambition to explain variation in the media prominence of incumbents implies that we need a multivariate test in which the effects of all explanatory variables are modeled simultaneously. Since our dataset includes several layers (issues and weeks) that may be considered groups or clusters of data, we estimate a set of multilevel models. More particularly, the multilevel analysis models

media prominence of both incumbent and opposition parties respectively, observed per week per issue. We measure the media prominence of incumbent and opposition separately because it makes it possible to get a more detailed examination of changes in the incumbency bonus. That way we can separate out, for instance, whether a drop in the incumbency bonus reflects that the incumbent receives less attention, the opposition receives more attention or both. Given our 27 policy issues, this means that the dataset consists of 27 categories repeated over 1,059 weeks for both incumbents and challengers ( $27 \times 1059 \times 2 = 57186$ ). As explained earlier, however, we only estimate relationships for the units (weeks  $\times$  issue categories) in which a minimum of one political actor appears in the news. Thus, the number of relevant cases is reduced to 25,274.<sup>41</sup>

Table 2 provides descriptive information of the variables in the statistical models. A dummy variable, *incumbents*, distinguishes between government/incumbents (coded as “1”) and alternative government/challengers (coded as “0”). The variable *election campaign* simply marks the campaign weeks in the dataset (note that an election campaign in Denmark usually lasts about three weeks). *News saliency* is operationalized as the count of news features for each unit, which means for each issue category per week. *Parliamentary strength* is measured as the share of seats in parliament of the government and alternative government parties. To test Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4, the latter three variables are interacted with the incumbent dummy variable. To examine Hypothesis 5, we also include weekly measures of the *poll standing* of incumbent and challenger parties

<sup>41</sup> We use Stata’s *xtmixed* command to run non-nested multilevel models, in which the variability at each level (issues and weeks) is estimated. The structure of the dataset is thus accounted for in the models, which estimate both fixed effects parameters (coefficients) and random effects parameters for crossed panels. The use of a non-nested model reflects that, logically, there is no nesting between weeks and issues (see also Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal 2008, chapter 11).

respectively.<sup>42</sup> Finally, government color (*Right of center government*) was included as a control variable.

*Table 2. Descriptives of variables in the empirical models.*

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Media prominence	46.25	43.33	0	100
Incumbents	0.5	0.50	0	1
Election campaign	0.02	0.14	0	1
News saliency	6.9	5.4	1	60
Parliamentary strength	37.9	5.0	30.8	50.9
Poll standing	36.3	4.3	-23.2	46.0
Right of center government	0.57	0.50	0	1

## FINDINGS

Table 3 presents the central tests of Hypotheses 1-4. The stepwise introduction of the interaction terms in Table 3 makes it possible to assess how sensitive the statistical estimates are to changes in model assumptions. Whereas it is no surprise that the constitutive terms change when interaction terms are added,<sup>43</sup> the robustness of the interaction terms both with and without the other interaction terms imply that we can confidently direct our attention to the full model (model 5) when evaluating the hypotheses.

<sup>42</sup> Surveys performed by Gallup and data made available by Jacob Askham-Christensen (2012).

<sup>43</sup> See Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006.

Table 3. Media prominence of incumbents and challengers.

	Hypotheses	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Incumbents	(H1)	48.94*** (0.61)	49.07*** (0.61)	50.75*** (0.84)	27.52*** (4.60)	29.59*** (4.64)
Election campaign		2.32 (1.55)	7.00** (2.19)	2.32 (1.55)	1.96 (1.55)	6.37** (2.19)
News saliency		0.086+ (0.047)	0.089+ (0.047)	0.22*** (0.06)	0.09+ (0.05)	0.22*** (0.06)
Parliamentary strength		0.18** (0.06)	0.19** (0.06)	0.18** (0.06)	-0.20+ (0.10)	-0.19+ (0.10)
Right of center government		0.27 (0.48)	0.30 (0.48)	0.26 (0.48)	0.19 (0.48)	0.21 (0.48)
Incumbent X Election campaign	(H2)		-9.34** (3.10)			-8.80** (3.10)
Incumbent X Saliency	(H3)			-0.26** (0.08)		-0.25** (0.08)
Incumbent X Parliamentary strength	(H4)				0.58*** (0.12)	0.57*** (0.12)
Constant		14.39*** (2.414)	13.94*** (2.42)	13.56*** (2.43)	27.28*** (3.66)	25.95*** (3.668)
<i>Random-effects parameters</i>						
Variance (issues)		3.17	3.17	3.17	3.16	3.16
Variance (weeks)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Residual deviation		35.17	35.17	35.17	35.16	35.15
<i>N</i>		25274	25274	25274	25274	25274
Wald chi2		12844.8***	12858.0***	12859.5***	12877.5***	12903.6***
Log restricted-likelihood		-125859.82	-125853.21	-125856.37	-125849.97	-125840.51

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Wald chi-square tests whether all covariates are jointly significant.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, which stated that incumbents get more media coverage than the opposition, incumbency status has a strong and positive impact on the share of media coverage that political actors have. Furthermore, in line with the second hypothesis (H2), expecting the incumbency bonus to be greater in normal times than during election campaigns, Table 3 shows that the gap in media prominence between incumbents and challengers is reduced during election campaigns as the negative and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction of *incumbents* and *election campaign* indicates. Table 4 spells out this interaction effect, showing that while incumbents experience a small reduction in coverage during campaigns, challengers increase their prominence by 6 percentage points. In other words, the existence of an incumbency bonus is clearly not limited to elections campaigns, which has been the focus of the existing literature. Actually, the dominance of incumbent actors in the news is more pronounced outside election campaigns.

Table 4. Predicted news coverage of incumbents and challengers in routine and election times (H2).

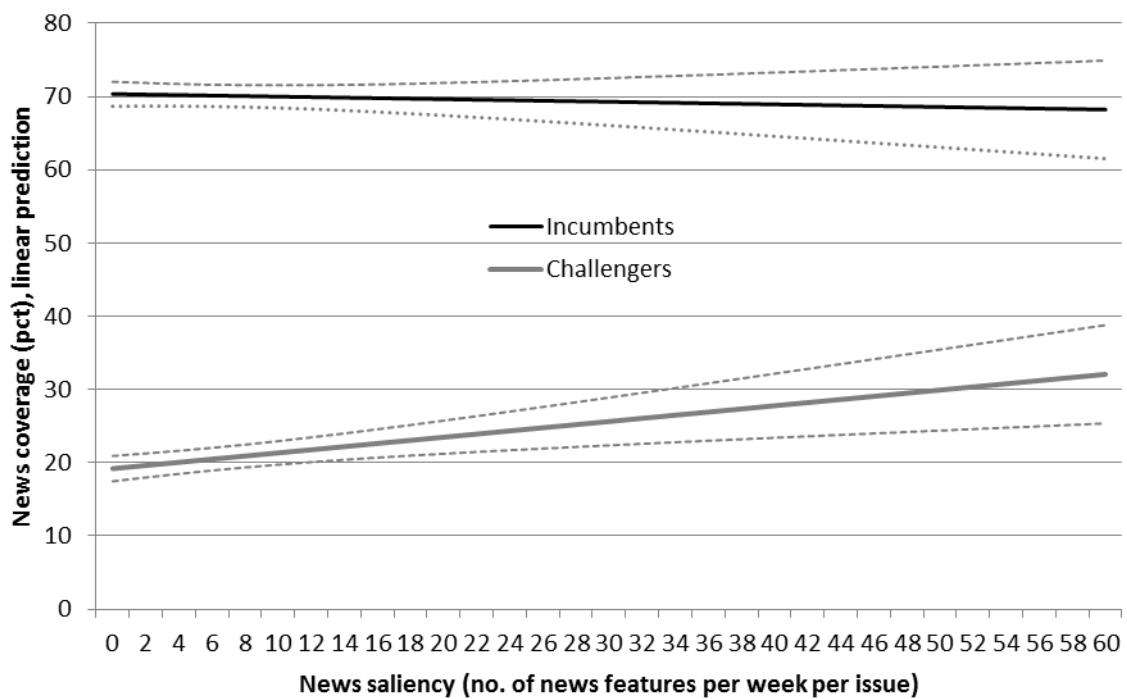
	Routine times	Election	Difference
Incumbents	70	68	2
Challengers	21	27	-6
Incumbency bonus	49	41	8

Note: Estimated with Model 5, Table 3. Rest of independent variables set at their mean.

Hypothesis 3, which stated that the incumbency bonus decreases with increasing media attention, is also supported by the results presented in Table 3. News saliency has a negative and statistically significant effect on incumbency dominance in media coverage. This interaction effect between *incumbents* and *news saliency* is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows how the lines representing

incumbents and challengers move closer as the number of broadcasted news features per week for an issue increases. Thus, when an issue attracts a minimum of media attention the incumbency bonus exceeds a 50 percentage point difference. However, for the issues that receive maximum attention in a given week, this difference in media prominence is reduced by 15 percentage points. In other words, the more intensively the media focus on an issue, the weaker the incumbency bonus becomes.

Figure 1. Predicted news coverage of incumbents and challengers as news saliency changes (H3).

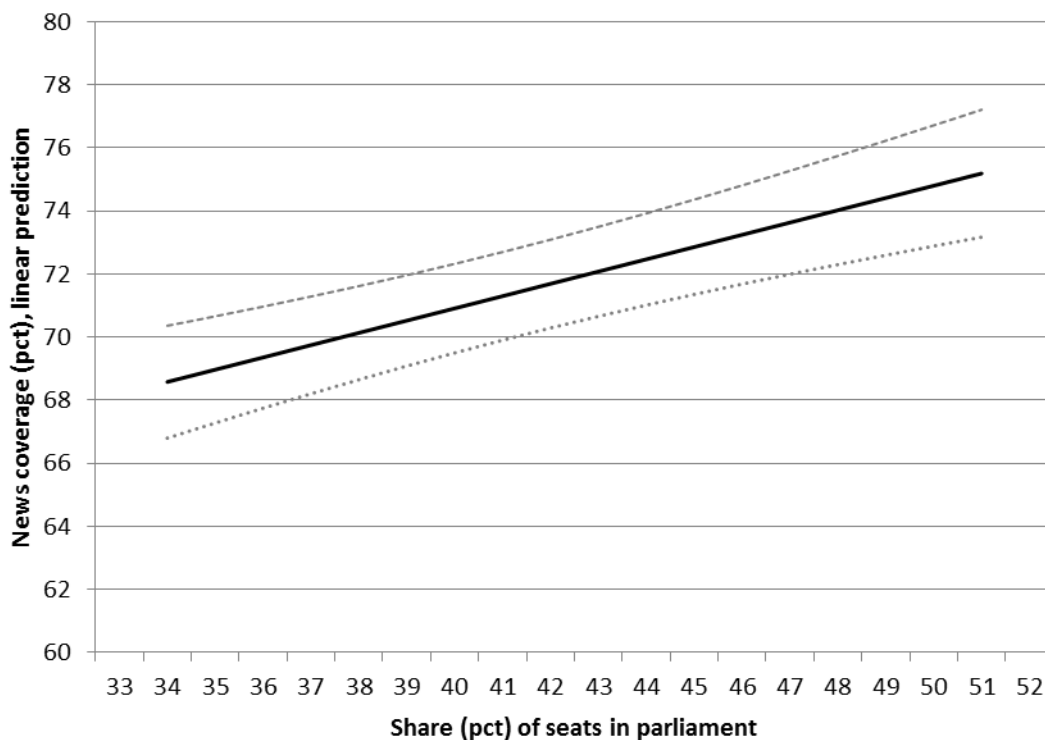


Note: Estimated with Model 5, Table 3. Rest of independent variables set at their mean.

According to Hypothesis 4, media prominence of incumbents is expected to increase with the parliamentary strength of the government. This expectation is supported by the positive and statistically significant interaction between *incumbents* and *parliamentary strength* in Table 3. To

illustrate the marginal effects of this interaction term, Figure 2 shows adjusted predictions of media prominence across the range of parliamentary strength that governments enjoyed in the period we study. The change from a weak minority government with a parliamentary base of 34 percent to a strong government controlling 51 percent of parliament increases incumbent media coverage by nearly 7 percentage points.

Figure 2. Predicted news coverage of incumbents as parliamentary strength changes (H4).



Note: Estimated with Model 5, Table 3. Rest of independent variables set at their mean.

*Media prominence and electoral support*

As noted above, during election campaigns, the incumbency bonus has been shown to increase with increasing incumbent strength in opinion polls.<sup>44</sup> However, as summarized in Hypothesis 5, our

<sup>44</sup> Hopmann, de Vreese, and Albæk 2011.

expectation is that outside election campaigns, incumbent support in opinion polls decreases with increases in media prominence. This expectation follows from the argument that outside election campaigns, the watch dog norm and the negativity bias of the media implies a strong focus on the government's responsibility for, and (lack of) responses to, societal problems and failures.

A first step in evaluating this idea is to actually document the negativity bias in the media and the critical coverage of government actors. To do this, we draw on a sample of radio news items from the year 2003, which have been further content coded. Besides the measure of actor prominence used above, the sample includes a tone coding based on whether the news item is bad, neutral, or good from the incumbent's point of view as well as a coding of whether the government is explicitly criticized in the news.<sup>45</sup>

*Table 5. News tone in sample of radio news features from 2003 (N=1980).*

		News without government actors	News with government actors	Total
News tone	Bad	50 %	44 %	49 %
	Neutral	28 %	32 %	29 %
	Good	22 %	24 %	22 %
	Total	100 %	100 %	100 %

Based on this content coding, Table 5 clearly shows that considerably more news items are bad than good from the governments point of view (49 % vs. 22 %). This is even the case when government actors appear in the news, though the dominance of bad versus good news is less pronounced compared to when no government actor is present (50 % versus 22 % compared to 44 % versus 24

<sup>45</sup>

The data is kindly provided to us by Gunnar Thesen (see also Thesen 2013).



%). Furthermore, Table 6 shows that in 55 percent of the negative news features in which incumbents appear, the government is explicitly subject to blame and criticism.<sup>46</sup> When government actors do not appear, the corresponding share of criticism is only 17 %. Thus, the media prominence of incumbents is clearly associated with more government criticism.

*Table 6. Government criticism in sample of negative radio news features from 2003 (N=972).*

		News without government actors	News with government actors	Total
Government criticism	Without	83 %	45 %	76 %
	With	17 %	55 %	24 %
	Total	100 %	100 %	100 %

Having established that news is generally bad news for the government and that government actors in the news are associated with government criticism, the next step is to see whether prominence of government actors in the media is actually followed by declining government support in opinion polls (H5). To examine this question, we perform a set of Granger causality tests of the relationship between opinion polls and media prominence. As expressed by Granger, the logic of this approach is that: "...  $Y_t$  is causing  $X_t$  if we are better able to predict  $X_t$  using all available information than if the information apart from  $Y_t$  had been used".<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> This coding does not capture how the opposition is covered, but in most instances, it would probably be justified to infer that what is bad for the government is good for the opposition and that the coverage of the opposition is therefore more positive.

<sup>47</sup> Granger 1969, 428.

Table 7. Granger causality-based multilevel models of the relationship between media prominence and poll standing (H5).

	(1) Incumbent parties	(2) Incumbent parties	(3) Challenger parties	(4) Challenger parties
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
	Polls <sub>t</sub>	Media prominence <sub>t</sub>	Polls <sub>t</sub>	Media prominence <sub>t</sub>
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Media prominence <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.0003** (0.0001)	0.0376** (0.0142)	-0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0718*** (0.0141)
Media prominence <sub>t-2</sub>	0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0381** (0.0140)	-0.0000 (0.0001)	0.0326* (0.0139)
Polls <sub>t-1</sub>	0.454*** (0.012)	0.555 (0.467)	0.533*** (0.012)	0.245 (0.684)
Polls <sub>t-2</sub>	0.357*** (0.012)	-0.451 (0.465)	0.409*** (0.012)	-0.558 (0.681)
Constant	7.028*** (0.343)	61.62*** (4.981)	2.082*** (0.190)	31.30*** (3.900)
<i>Random-effects parameters</i>				
Variance (issues)	.000	8.924	.000	4.853
Variance (weeks)	1.296	2.283	.701	.002
Residual deviation	.375	34.242	.257	31.588
<i>N</i>	6962	5118	6962	5118
<i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>	9963.47***	342.76***	9509.92***	80.47***

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Including both one- and two-weeks lags in the model, Table 7 provides evidence of one-sided causality going from media prominence to standing in polls. Furthermore, the effect is negative, which supports the idea that media prominence may be a double-edged sword, but only when you are an incumbent party (see model 1 in Table 7) and not when you belong to the opposition (see model 3 in Table 7). In combination with the results of the more detailed coding shown in Tables 5 and 6, this Granger causality-inspired analysis challenges the idea that media dominance is a *bonus*, instead offering an integrated perspective on the causes and consequences of the incumbency

bonus: If what gets you in the news is a combination of policy responsibility and the media's critical coverage of societal problems, then media visibility is likely to come at the cost of electoral support.<sup>48</sup>

### *Robustness of results*

The robustness of the main findings has been explored in several ways. First, we have re-run the analyses reported in Table 3 after replacing the measure of incumbents with a measure that only counts ministers as incumbents (excluding MPs and MEPs from governing parties). This shows essentially the same results as already reported.<sup>49</sup>

Second, we have re-estimated the models presented in Table 3 by excluding the 27 issues one at a time. This jackknife analysis provides information about the sensitivity of the conclusions to the impact of potential issue outliers. It turns out, however, that excluding issues had no important effect on the results reported above. Looking at the individual issues, we find an incumbency bonus on all issues, however, of varying strength.

Third, as van Aelst and de Swert (2009) also include EP and local elections, we added these election weeks both separately and in combination with national elections. On their own, EP

<sup>48</sup> The dataset contains too few election weeks to run the Granger inspired analysis for election weeks separately. The models in Table 7 have been estimated without election weeks. If we re-run the analysis including election weeks, the negative effects of media coverage on incumbent party support is, as expected, slightly weaker.

<sup>49</sup> The dataset also contains the length (in seconds) of radio-news features. Thus, instead of just counting the number of radio features with a given actor, one could also look at the time the actors were present in the news. Running the models with this variable instead produced results almost identical to those reported in Table 3 (results are available upon request).

and local elections were not statistically significant and had no substantial effect on the other results. From this, we conclude that non-national elections are considered quite differently from a media perspective (results of all robustness checks are available upon request).

Finally, we utilize the opportunities that the Danish minority governments offer for testing how sensitive the media coverage is to the political context. Recall that in systems with frequent minority governments, some of the media dominance that governments in majority systems enjoy could, potentially, rub off on opposition parties that support the government. Furthermore, support parties are interesting from a media perspective because they hold blackmail potential vis-à-vis government. When a minority government proposes new policies, there is often considerable media interest in how support parties respond. This feature of minority rule adds a special dynamic of interest to the media, namely a potential conflict within the government bloc. In sum, the political context of minority rule means that some non-government parties are deemed more newsworthy than others because they exert more policy influence and hold more policy responsibility.

To investigate this, we have run the same analyses as those reported above, with the exception that the variable *incumbents* is replaced with an *incumbent support* dummy variable that separates government support parties (1) from parties supporting the government alternative (0). The central result is that support parties of the government do have more news coverage than opposition parties that would have supported the alternative government – also when controlling for their parliamentary strength (results are not shown but available from the authors upon request). We interpret this finding as further evidence of how political context variables matter when explaining the media prominence of political actors.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has suggested a new perspective on the media prominence of political parties. The goal was not just to show the existence of an incumbency bonus but also to improve our understanding of why it varies and what its consequences might be. Supplementing the “reflection of power perspective” that has dominated the literature so far, we argue that what determines the level of media prominence is the interaction between political context and journalistic norms and news values. Decisions about the newsworthiness of incumbents and challengers are not products of a fixed recipe, but change according to the political reality being covered. When the political context changes, the relative importance of the watch dog norm and the norm about political balance is affected. These different norms highlight that the news relevance of political actors is sometimes gauged from the perspective of societal problems and failures, where a critical focus on incumbents is highly relevant, and at other times from the perspective of political conflicts or party competition, implying that the issue of impartiality and balance between contenders is crucial. Therefore, we have argued that during election campaigns and during conflicts over salient issues, the journalistic norm about political balance increases its importance at the cost of the critical watch dog norm, leading to a reduction in the incumbency bonus.

Thus, the incumbency bonus is the result of how the media focus on societal problems and confront the government with problems that it is expected to solve. What is interpreted as a question of government power in the existing literature is, from our perspective, just as much a question of responsibility: The media reflect and *challenge* political power through addressing the responsibility that accompanies it. In fact, considering the critical news attention underlying the dominance of government actors in the media, talking about an incumbency “bonus” is questionable unless negative coverage is better than no coverage. However, it does not seem so. The Granger

causality-inspired analysis above indicated that increases in the media coverage of incumbents tend to be followed by a drop in opinion polls.

Our findings draw on a dataset on Danish radio news from 1984-2003. The dataset is unique in terms of the length of the time period covered with data on a daily basis, whereas most of the existing findings are based on an election campaign only. As mentioned, Denmark is a typical example of Hallin and Mancini's democratic corporatist model.<sup>50</sup> One characteristic aspect of this model is the central role of public broadcasting, which further supports the relevance of using public radio news. Thus, findings based on Danish public broadcasting should *at least* be generalizable to the northern and central European countries, which are relatively similar in terms of media systems. However, the ideas of neutral informative journalism cut across all media systems, just as the importance of public broadcasting can also be found in the UK, which otherwise has a more market-oriented media system.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the findings reported above most likely have relevance beyond the North and Central European context.

The above results illustrate how increased knowledge about the incumbency bonus affects our perception of its democratic implications. Existing research has shown how this phenomenon is a near universal aspect of media-politics relations in Western democracies. However, the term "bonus" has suggested that this media bias mostly works in the favor of incumbents. This argument rests on the fact that politicians depend on the media to communicate with the electorate and that media dominance therefore – *in theory* – could be translated to electoral support. Our perspective, stressing the watch dog norm and news negativity, have clearly challenged the "bonus" term.

<sup>50</sup> Hallin and Mancini 2004, 143-197; Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Hallin and Mancini 2004, 21-45.

One possible further interpretation of our results is that modern mass media countervail political power and that the incumbency bonus should actually be considered a positive, democratic phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> However, as argued by Bennett,<sup>53</sup> this is debatable. For instance, news values that favor simplicity, scandal and personalization might disturb the straightforward conclusion that incumbent dominance in the news contributes to democratic control. What if the watch dog norm is applied in a way that leads to media focus on small problems or non-policy related events at the expense of important and complex policy problems that are less newsworthy? Thus, the question of which problems attract media attention becomes central, again pointing to the need for more research into the relationship between media prominence and democratic politics.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Zaller 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett 2003.

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